

A REASON FOR MURDER

ABOUT THIS BOOK

It seemed incredible that murder could have stepped over the threshold of a solidly comfortable home on the edge of an Oxfordshire village, and seized Walter Yalding, the husband of Annette and father of a daughter he idolised; and when Superintendent William Austen of Scotland Yard began his investigation, he quickly realised that his only chance of unmasking the killer lay in a close study of the murdered man's character.

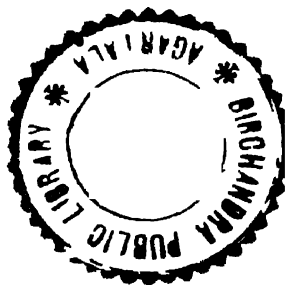
Miss Hocking's new detective story is not merely an adroit account of sudden death, but also a fascinating study in character. She has superbly succeeded in showing how ugly family life can become, despite a veneer of respectability and seeming unity, whenever a tyrant is at the helm.

By the same author

AT THE "CEDARS"
PRUSSIAN BLUE
DEATH AT THE WEDDING
THE VULTURES GATHER
NILE GREEN
SIX GREEN BOTTLES
ONE SHALL BE TAKEN
MISS MILVERTON
NIGHT'S CANDLES
THE WICKED FLEW
OLD MRS. FITZGERALD
SO MANY DOORS
ILL DEEDS DONE
THE LITTLE VICTIMS AT PLAY
DEATH DISTURBS MR. JEFFERSON
MEDITERRANEAN MURDER
THERE'S DEATH IN THE CUP
BEST LAID PLANS
THE EVIL THAT MEN DO
DEATH AMONG THE TULIPS
AND NO ONE WEPT
POISON IN PARADISE

Anne Hocking

A REASON
FOR MURDER



W. H. ALLEN
LONDON

*Made in Great Britain at the St Ann's Press, Park Road,
Altrincham, for the publishers, W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd.,
Essex Street, Strand, London, W.C.2*

A REASON FOR MURDER

I

PEOPLE who knew much about the ins and outs of the Yalding's domestic affairs used to say that if things went on like that, someone was going to get murdered. They were uncertain as to who would murder whom or what would be the particular bit of trouble which would send the balloon up, but, so they said, laughingly, someone would undoubtedly be driven too far and too hard and murder would be the end of it.

Well, murder was. "They", that ubiquitous, omniscient and anonymous "They" were right for once, but not for some considerable time.

The end, of course—so far as human affairs can ever have an end, for even death has its repercussions on the surviving—lay far in the past, as it usually does. You can trace it directly back to Mrs. Lestrangle herself and probably to her ancestry, but that, perhaps, is going a little too far.

Let's start with her.

She was born in France of a French mother and an English father who died when she was in her teens, and she lived entirely in France until she was twenty. She owed very little to her English ancestry; her attitude to life, her habit of thought, remained incurably French even after thirty years of life in England married to an English husband.

She was a most strikingly beautiful girl when she married George Lestrangle in the early 1900's—there may have been some French in his distant ancestry, judging

by his name—and she was a strikingly beautiful woman when he died. To the day of her death she looked at least fifteen years younger than she was; her figure was perfect; there wasn't a trace of grey in her deep black hair and hardly a line on her classically moulded face. She had charm and just that hint of autocracy which a really beautiful woman nearly always acquires. She was devoted to George Lestrangle and she bore him three children, two boys, and a girl who was called Annette, and was, as they say, the apple of her eye.

At twenty Annette was a pretty little thing, soft and dimpled and affectionate.

She didn't appear to have much force of character which most people put down to the fact that her mother had a great deal, and benevolently dominated the girl, but she had enough to stand up for herself when it came to the question of marrying Walter Yalding. Mrs. Lestrangle didn't actively oppose the marriage, but she wasn't at all keen on it.

"Look, Annette," she reasoned when the business was first mooted to her. "I do not say do not marry him, but I do say wait and think. You are very young. You will meet other men who may be more—suitable."

"There's nothing wrong with Walter, Mama," Annette protested—"And I love him."

Mrs. Lestrangle shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "As for that, my child, that, at your age, will pass. There is nothing wrong with him, but is there anything right except that you think you are in love with him? He is not very well off; he is not very well born——"

"You're a snob, Mama darling," her daughter interrupted her. "What does that matter? We're not particularly well off ourselves, and nowadays it doesn't matter what a man's parents are, it's what he is himself."

"And your Walter is all you want in a man? Marriage

is for life, remember. Will he wear well, as one might say? Have you tastes in common? Do you look on life in the same way? That may not matter now, in your Springtime, but what of the Autumn? Have you thought of that? "

Active opposition on Mrs. Lestrangle's part might have prevented the marriage, but she didn't produce it. Having put the arguments against, she let Annette go her own way, reflecting, probably, with her French common sense, that Yalding, though he didn't particularly attract her as a husband for her only daughter, was the type who would probably do well in the world and make money, and that money can compensate for a lot of differences in temperament. He was certainly wildly in love with Annette, and almost worshipped her and if she didn't mind the rather common streak in him, it was her affair and not her mother's.

So they were married and Annette was happy in a quiet contented sort of way and Walter was in raptures.

She, perhaps, had been wiser than her mother in choosing him as a husband; she had seen, perhaps, more deeply into his character than a woman not in love with him could ever do.

Walter Yalding had, quite unexpectedly, a complex nature. He was a poet *manqué* and go-getter combined; a realist and a romanticist simultaneously.

His parents were lower middle-class, hard-working, unimaginative, honest people who had brought up their children respectably, with some affection, none of it demonstrative. Walter, unaccountably, grew up with a hidden adoration of beauty in any form in which he saw it and an unsatisfied craving to be loved. His ideal of beauty was, perhaps, not too high, being largely based on what he saw at the cinema, but it made him discontented

with Kilburn and determined to get out of it as quickly as possible and lead quite a different sort of life from that which his parents took for granted.

That, he soon realised, involved having more money than they had, and he determined to get it as quickly as possible. The slow way up wasn't going to satisfy him, and the only question was—which was the fastest way.

His parents sympathized with his ambitions but were frightened of their altitude. They thought that a job as a bank clerk was the height at which he should aim—respectable, black-coated, with steady rises in pay and a pension to look forward to. He laughed at that. He was going to be a rich man, an employer, not employed.

He started with an errand boy's job in a publisher's office and he learnt a lot there, and his ideas became crystallised. Anything to do with books was what he then called "classy"; moreover the people associated with them were classy too. Also they spoke and behaved in a way that he was already trying to imitate.

His next job was in a big advertising agency. He started low down but worked his way up very quickly. Someone discovered that he had a flair for the thing and he went straight ahead. There was no chance of his getting on fast enough in a firm of that size—there was too much competition—so he looked around until he found a smaller one, became a prop and a stay to the two talented but unpractical men who ran it, and he soon made himself indispensable to them and was, later on, taken into partnership with them.

It was through them that he met Annette Lestrangle. His partners were a kindly pair and had noticed with sympathy young Yalding's efforts to improve himself, so they occasionally took him to a party with them and at one of them Annette swam into his vision.

She was all that he had ever dreamed of. Her gentleness, her prettiness, her social poise swept him right off his hitherto earthbound feet.

What she saw in him is another story, but from the first there was some attraction. She asked him to her home—Mrs. Lestrangé, sensible woman, kept open house for Annette's friends—several times and accepted a diffident invitation from him to go to the theatre. Soon, they were constantly in one another's company.

"What do you see in that young man?" Mrs. Lestrangé demanded presently. "I find him very dull."

"He isn't, Mama," Annette assured her. "Not when he forgets to be shy. He's frightened of you, you see."

"Of me? Pray why should anyone be afraid of me?"

Annette laughed. "Well, you are rather *formidable*"—she gave the word its French pronunciation—"to a man who isn't used to what you call good society."

"——which he certainly isn't. That speaks for itself. He tries too hard."

"He has to learn, Mama."

"And you are teaching him? You are sorry for him, my child?"

"In a way, but he's clever, you know."

Mrs. Lestrangé considered. "Yes, I think he is. I believe he plays on your sympathy, Annette. You must beware of that. It is one of your dangers. You are a sentimentalist at heart, my dear—rather a dangerous thing to be. For myself, I am a realist, as you know, but you take after your father. He was always too soft-hearted."

Walter Yalding was doing well when he and Annette were married and his income, though not large, was quite comfortable and gave every sign of becoming larger. The advertising business was expanding and before long one of the original partners would be retiring and Walter

would take his place. He looked forward to the time when he would be the sole head of the firm.

They started their married life in a nice little house in the Hampstead Garden Suburb. It was quite roomy, thoroughly modern, with every possible gadget which could make it easy to work. Mrs. Lestrangle thought that it was dreadful, but she was far too wise to say so. She merely shrugged her elegant shoulders, murmured to herself in French "everyone to his taste" and gave them a cheque for a wedding present instead of the one or two pieces of inherited and valuable furniture which she had intended giving.

Directly after the wedding she went off to Paris to stay with her elder son, who lived there, and was able to deliver herself of her opinions to him in her favourite language.

"But it is inconceivable, my dear, to what a depth of commonplace your sister has descended. The house, the furniture, the everything are of the most ordinary, the most bourgeois—words fail me. And she was brought up in surroundings of distinction, as you know—as, indeed, you were yourself—and this—this—is what she chooses for herself. However, she is contented, so what affair is it of mine? She is, in effect, happy, and that is all I wish for—and that she may continue to be so."

Maurice, who was a contented bachelor, laughed. "Dear Mama, why not accept the fact that Annette is as unlike you as she can possibly be—otherwise, she would not have married Walter Yalding. That speaks for itself, does it not?"

That of course was completely true. Annette, though she dearly loved and admired her mother, knew a contentment without her which she had never known with her. Life with Walter was so much simpler. He made no such demands on her as Mrs. Lestrangle did.

All he asked of her was affection and she had no difficulty at all in giving him that. He never urged her to improve her mind or exert her wits as her mother had done. He liked her to be well dressed and run his house nicely, and both of those came easily to her. She had, at least, inherited a Gallic flair for those things.

So, life for the young Yaldings was infinitely to their taste. He, in fact, was almost absurdly happy: his dreams were coming true. He had the prettiest wife in the world, who loved him as he did her, the kind of house which he'd hardly thought of aspiring to not so long ago—and they were *his*. He was developing a pride of possession.

There was, however as time went on one flaw in the crystal—they had no children and they both passionately longed for them.

When they'd been married five years and were still childless, they began seriously to worry about it. Annette started going to church regularly and praying about it. Mrs. Lestrangle had been born and bred a Catholic, but her husband was a Protestant. He would have said that he was entirely without religious prejudice and he never made the least attempt to interfere with his wife's beliefs, but when their children were born he wouldn't agree to their being brought up as Catholics.

Mrs. Lestrangle regretted this quite a lot but she didn't think that Paris was worth a Mass, or, in other words, she cared for her husband and his approval so greatly that she gave in and the children were brought up in the established church.

Annette's school was "High" in tendency, and, as girls often do, she accepted its religious attitude and adopted it, though, after she married Walter she became lax in her observances. Now, she began to wonder if she were being punished for her neglect of her duties and

returned to them ardently, as if to make up for lost time.

Walter quite approved of that. He had more or less no religion himself but he approved of it for women. He had no particular prejudices about any form of it and Annette's near-Catholicism made no impact on him at all. It didn't seem to produce results as far as children were concerned though, and they consulted doctors, who assured them that there was no reason why they shouldn't have children. Still, they didn't.

They began to fret about it. Annette was an intensely maternal woman and ached for a baby. Walter, who was steadily making more money, wanted someone to leave it to. He also wanted to have a family of his own.

Eventually they decided to adopt a child. That would be better than nothing and the idea made Annette a lot happier. She had visions of rescuing some dear little unwanted baby from neglect—she was very much a sentimentalist.

Walter, however, didn't see it that way.

"No, dearest," he said earnestly, "I shouldn't like that. Not a foundling, if that's what you mean. We want a child who'll grow up to be a credit to us, and you don't know what you might be getting if you took one out of a Home."

She half agreed. "I see what you mean, darling, but—well, how else could we get one?"

It appeared that he had a well worked out plan. He had a brother, Alfred, who, while you couldn't exactly call him the black sheep of the thrifty and hard-working Yaldings, was at least a bit greyish. There was nothing really against him, except that he wasn't thrifty and he wasn't very hard-working. He was a drifter, a good-hearted, cheerful chap who couldn't stick to anything

very long. He had a hard-working and thoroughly good sort of wife and simply masses of children, who, Walter feared, never had quite as much to eat as they ought.

His idea was that he and Annette should adopt Alfred's youngest, a boy of between four and five. Thus charity would be kept at home, the other children would benefit, and he and Annette would know that their adopted son came of good sound stock and not be likely to "Turn out Queer" as a foundling might. He would belong right away.

At first Annette hated the idea. It wasn't that she had anything against the Alfred Yaldings and their family, but—a boy of over four. That wasn't what she'd been dreaming of at all. Visions of tiny garments faded. You couldn't tie up a child of that age in pink or blue ribbons, according to sex; there would be no cot with a sleeping baby to lean over in the evenings; she didn't think that she could feel maternal about a child so, so to speak, ready-made as that.

All the same she didn't drastically negative the proposal, seeing that Walter was so keen. She temporised. She must think about it and see if she could get used to the idea.

"Look here, darling," Walter suggested. "Let's have the boy for a week-end and see what you think of him. You never know, you might fall for him at once."

"Have you seen him?" she asked. She had never had more than the merest glimpse of any of Walter's family. He wasn't ashamed of them, exactly, but he was conscious that they wouldn't have much in common with his wife. He paid them occasional visits and was very generous to his parents, and he was aware that he, himself, had outgrown them.

"He's a dear little chap," he assured her. "Alice brings up her children well in spite of her difficulties."

So little Adrian came to stay with them several times. His name, incidentally, was due to the fact that the fertile Alice was a great reader and called each of her many children after the hero or heroine of the current novelette at the time she was confined. The result, as might be expected, was a pretty mixed bag.

Adrian, however, wasn't unsuitably named. He really was a charming little boy, fair-haired, with a clear skin and blue eyes, and his manners were beautiful.

"He does Alice credit, you must admit," Walter observed. "He's a little shy, but that's only natural. It'll soon wear off when he gets to know us better."

Annette was delighted with the child but she still demurred at adopting him. She told Walter that she simply loved being an Aunt to him, but she couldn't see herself as his mother. She was dreadfully torn between her affection for the child, her desire to please Walter and her own deep-seated longing for a real baby, small and helpless and cuddlesome, who would never have known any mother but herself.

She consulted her own mother.

"You do see what I mean, Mama," she said, when she'd explained her difficulty. "Adrian's an absolute little darling and I love having him in the house, but——"

"But you cannot possibly pretend that he is your own child," Mrs. Lestrangle put it into words for her. "That is what it amounts to, in effect, is it not? With a month-old baby you could persuade yourself to imagining that it was yours. I think that you are right, my dear. You will have most to do with the child for many years, and it is your feelings which should be consulted. Nevertheless, I do counsel you not to be precipitate over this scheme of adoption. You are still very young, you know. You can afford to wait."

Annette tried to explain to Walter more clearly what

she felt about Adrian, and though he partially understood he had, by now, got very fond of the boy. Also, he was obsessed with the idea of its being one of his own family whom he was going to accept as his son.

"Look here, my dearest," he persuaded, "I'll make a bargain with you. We'll adopt the little chap and then when a brother or sister comes along—which it certainly will soon, Alice has never let up for so long before—we'll arrange to take it from the moment it's born. Will that suit you?"

She half agreed. "But what will Alice feel about it, Walter? What does she feel about our having Adrian, anyway? Haven't we been rather high-handed about it all?"

Walter shook his head. "Alice is a good mother and a sensible woman. She's sorry to part with the child, of course, but she sees that it's in his best interests."

So Annette asked Adrian, on his next visit, how he would like to live with them always, and the little boy flushed and looked round the playroom which she had stocked with toys for him and said that it would be lovely. Then he hesitated and asked if Mummy could come too, and when Annette explained that Mummy would have to stay and look after the other children, he didn't think that he could get on without her.

"You could go and see Mummy quite often," she comforted.

"Every day?"

"Well, not every day, perhaps. She might be out, you see."

He thought that over. "Every week, then?"

"We mightn't be able to manage that, you know, Adrian. Quite often, though."

"How much is quite often?"

She tried to explain but failed to satisfy the child.

"It's lovely here," he said, "but it wouldn't be the same if I didn't know I was going back to Mummy."

That wrung Annette's tender heart and she told Walter what she felt.

"I love him even more for his loyalty to his mother, but that makes it seem so wrong to take him away from her."

"He'll soon get used to it," Walter argued. "Children have very short memories."

She wasn't convinced, all the same, and insisted that Alice must be consulted and asked whether she thought that the child would ever settle down and be happy without her.

Alice was, as her brother-in-law had attested, a sensible woman.

"If you've made up your minds that you want him," she said, "leave it to me and I'll talk to him. He's a good child and I'll explain to him that it'll be helping me, and he'll see it differently."

"But I couldn't bear it if I felt he was fretting," Annette protested.

"He won't fret," Alice assured her. "Not really. We'll tell him that he's coming to you for a long visit, and if I know anything about children and if you treat him the right way, which I'm sure you will or I wouldn't let you have him, he'll gradually get used to being with you and forget all about us. Children are like that." She sighed.

So it was settled, but even when she had agreed in principle, Annette's instincts seemed all for delaying tactics.

Walter went off to his lawyer to discuss the steps necessary for a formal and legal adoption of his nephew, and when he came back, Annette sprung a surprise on him.

"I've been thinking," she began, "that we ought to

leave this house, darling, before Adrian comes to us for good."

"What!" he exclaimed, quite taken aback.

"Well, you see, Walter, I have a feeling that a child should live for a good many years in the same place while he's growing up, and this house won't really be big enough when he gets a bit bigger. I mean, he ought to have a real nursery to start with which can be a proper playroom for him, later on and—well, the real country is better for children, and if we had a paddock or something like that, he could have a pony—perhaps I might even start riding again and teach him. I'd love that—and a big garden, perhaps——" she broke off, "that is, of course, if we could afford it."

"Oh! Afford——" he said, quickly, as if brushing that aside. As a matter of fact, he could never bear to think that there was anything he couldn't afford if she wanted it. "We can afford it, all right. It's just that you rather took my breath away. I thought we were so happy here——"

He left the sentence hanging rather wistfully. He'd been so very proud of that house when he bought it.

She reassured him quickly. "Oh yes! my dearest, of course we have. It's only as I said, that I do believe that it would be better for Adrian if we were to move before he comes. If we were to go right away from here, to a new place where no one knows us, there'll never be any questions asked and people will think that Adrian is really our child and that will make everything easier and nicer."

She didn't follow this up at the time, but left him to think it over. She had learnt, over the years, how to manage her Walter. He hated being rushed into things. If she left him alone now, and he approved of her suggestion, he would presently produce it as if it were his own unaided work.

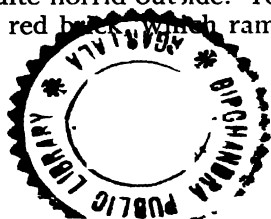
Actually, he was very taken with the idea when he'd considered it a little. He could very well afford a fair-sized house in the country—they were comparatively cheap in those between-war years, and advertising in a big way was coming into its own and there weren't so many firms to compete with. He was really very comfortably off though, not yet having rounded Cape Turk—if he ever did—he hadn't ever told Annette what the state of his finances was. He was generous with her, but he liked her to ask for money when she wanted it. He enjoyed giving it to her, partly, probably, because doing so and the fact that he was able to, seemed to him to lessen, as it were, the distance between them. Somewhere, at the back of his mind there lurked the consciousness that he was not her equal in breeding or education and that Mrs. Lestrangle must consider that her daughter had married beneath her. Money, he felt, would level that up to some extent. He'd show her.

He found the idea of himself as a Country Gentleman most attractive and he believed that it might do him good in business, too. To be able to ask prospective clients for a week-end to "My Little Place in The Country" might prove quite a help.

Of course, his thoughts went on, it mustn't be too far from London. Somewhere near a good train service was essential, but that ought to be fairly easy. The post-war boom was over and the slump had hit most people, so there wouldn't be too many people like himself wanting to buy and not to sell.

So they set about looking for a small country house and found what they wanted without too much difficulty. It stood just outside a village in Oxfordshire, high above the Thames.

It was late Edwardian and quite horrid outside. To the basic structure of dead-looking red brick, which rambled



oddly about in several directions, a presumably perverted mind—whether the architect's or the owner's doesn't really matter—had added a diversity of embellishments from a number of architectural styles, nearly all bad, and, practically speaking, only minarets had been omitted. As Annette didn't care and Walter didn't know how unsavoury the thing was and the price asked was low and Walter beat that down a bit, they bought it.

All they really minded about was the inside, and that was satisfactory in every way. It was, in fact, a model of solid comfort. The rooms were large and light and looked out on lovely gardens; the plumbing was plentiful, and there was central heating everywhere.

As their present house was small, they sold it at a profit, and once both deals were settled, Walter was in a hurry to move. He had begun to visualise himself in his new rôle and he wanted to play it at once. To own a country house and not to be enjoying it in the summer seemed absurd, so Walter went into action and hustled everyone concerned to such good effect that they were ready to move by the end of June.

A week before the appointed day, Walter came back from business in the evening to find Annette waiting for him in an unwonted state of excitement—she was usually prettily placid. She was flushed and looked as though she had been crying.

"Oh, Walter! Walter!" she greeted him, jumping up from her chair and flinging her arms around him. "It's too wonderful and I hardly know how to tell you. We're going to have a baby!"

He couldn't take it in for a moment but when she had said it again and he was convinced that she meant it, he was almost speechless with joy. All he could do was to cling to her and murmur over and over again: "My darling! My wonderful, wonderful darling!"

Presently, he became coherent and asked questions and got reassurances.

She had suspected it for some weeks, she said, but hadn't dared to say anything in case it weren't true, but today she had seen her doctor who had told her that she was right and that somewhere towards the end of December her baby—"our very own baby, Walter"—would be born.

There can never have been prospective parents more thrilled. They were both swept off their feet with happiness; they could talk of nothing else. There was only one thought which wasn't sheer joy—Adrian.

Walter, at that moment, was so exuberant that he forgot all caution when Annette raised the subject.

"He shan't suffer," he promised her. "I'll give him the same education as I would have done if we'd adopted him, and take him into the business at the end of it or set him up in something else if he'd rather."

She, more tender-hearted than ever, in her happiness, was just a little sad about the boy.

"I do hope he won't be dreadfully disappointed, Walter. He does so love staying with us and I've got so fond of him. We must keep a room for him, always, that he can think of as his own, and we must go and see him at school and take him out and have him in the holidays and do everything we can for him. I do hope that he won't mind too much or be jealous of our baby——"

She was really quite upset about it, but Walter comforted her and planned treats for Adrian and that led them to planning for their own child, and for quite a time Adrian was forgotten.

No woman ever had a more pampered pregnancy than Annette. Walter had loved her before; he worshipped her now. He lapped her round with luxury and care—in fact,

he was on his way to killing her with kindness when Mrs. Lestrangle stepped in.

She came to stay with them in the September after they had moved to Lawn Lodge—no one knew why it was called that. It wasn't a lodge, there was nothing special about its lawn and the name had nothing to do with the nearest village, Mansfield.

It was a mellow day on which she arrived and the garden looked lovely in the sunshine. The dahlias blazed, the late roses rioted, and the weather was warmer than it had been all the summer. And yet Annette was lying in a bedroom dimmed by drawn curtains, with shawl over her knees.

"My poor child, are you ill?" her mother cried in alarm.

"Oh no!" said Annette, who looked the picture of health. "Only resting."

"But why not outside, in the sunshine?"

Then the story came out. Walter was looking after her so carefully that she was practically allowed to do nothing. He had laid down a timetable for her and insisted on her keeping to it.

She never got up before midday and then she walked—slowly—in the garden for ten minutes. After lunch she rested in her bedroom until four when she took another ten minutes "exercise". Later on, when Walter came home, he took her for a drive in the car. If she wanted to go shopping in the village—ten minutes walk away—she had to ring up for a taxi to take her.

"But my dear child," Mrs. Lestrangle was horrified. "What does your doctor say to all this?"

"Well, he says that I should behave as usual and do as much as I feel inclined to, but Walter doesn't agree with him. You see, Mama, he has memories of his own mother who had dreadful illnesses and lost several of her babies.

and he's sure it's because she didn't get enough rest. So he's going to make sure that I do."

Scorn, hardly hidden, came into Mrs. Lestrangle's voice. "I feel that his mother's case and yours are a little different. Probably she had too many children too quickly and not enough to eat. That, my dear, is not your trouble. However, if you go on like this you will probably have a dreadful confinement and a stillborn child, and you will lose your figure completely, and then you'll probably lose your husband as well. I shall speak to Walter."

She did, and to such effect that Annette's régime was changed completely, and on Christmas Eve she gave birth, with very little trouble, to a healthy daughter.

2

THE little Carol—she only just escaped being called Noël, but providentially the village carol singers arrived less than an hour after she was born—was the loveliest child. Annette, in her rosiest dreams, could not have imagined a lovelier.

Even when she was newly born she was pretty, far more human and finished-looking than most new babies, and Annette, who had been warned to expect to see something rather wizened and monkey-like to start with, was thrilled with what she had produced.

She was a little worried at first that the baby was a girl, though that was what she had secretly longed for, but she knew that Walter, equally, as he thought, secretly, wanted a son.

Almost the first thing she said to him when he was allowed to see her, was :

“Darling, are you terribly disappointed with our daughter? ”

He lied manfully. “Of course not. I didn’t care which it was. So long as you’re all right and we’ve got our baby safely, it’s all the same to me.”

Very soon that became true. He fell under Carol’s spell the first time her tiny, delicate fingers clasped one of his and, from then on, he wouldn’t have changed her for all the boys in creation.

By the time she was a year old she was the most exquisite little creature, a sort of fairy doll child, tiny, with golden curls and blue eyes and a cream and roses skin.

People used to turn round and stare at her when she was out in her pram, much to the joy of her nannie who gained kudos from it.

With every year she seemed to grow lovelier, and she so filled her parents' eyes and minds and hearts that they didn't care in the least that she remained an only child.

She had all the other attributes too. She was placid and sweet-tempered, obedient and healthy. She cooed gently in her cradle, lisped engagingly when she began to talk and was always smilingly contented. She never laughed much and was never noisy—a model child, in fact.

How she escaped being unbearably spoiled was mostly due to her own unspoilable nature. The rest was Walter's doing. He, though he practically worshipped the child, was able to be firm with her, which Annette was quite unable to do. It was always he who dealt with her in her very few childish naughtinesses. It was he who refused her things she wanted, which were not good for her. Annette simply couldn't resist when Carol pleaded for just ten minutes more before she went to bed, or another chocolate above her quota, or any of those treats which children do ask for.

She led a very gentle life surrounded by love and adulation and she was, in some ways, what nurses used to call "old fashioned".

She saw very few other children. There were a few carefully selected, socially irreproachable little girls living round about at whose houses she occasionally went to tea and who sometimes came to tea with her, always with nannies in attendance to see that no one got over-excited and that there were no "rough games".

Hers wasn't a normal child's life by any means, but it didn't seem to affect her adversely. Apparently it only made her a little quieter and a little more self contained than most children. She talked a great deal to a large

family of dolls, to which she was devoted, and her parents thought that was so pretty and sweet, but it never occurred to them to wonder if she oughtn't to have been chattering to other children instead.

Her greatest treat was a visit from Adrian whom she loved dearly though, of course, the nearly six years' difference in their ages didn't make them exactly companions for one another. She used to follow him round admiringly, when she could manage to keep up with him, and he regarded her as a sort of extra special animated toy which he had to look after very carefully. He was tremendously impressed by her smallness and found it quite wonderful when she could walk and talk. He used to recount her exploits to his uncle and aunt with such evident pride that they took a very good view of him.

He was a very nice little boy and good-looking still, in spite of the fact that he was growing fast. The exclusive Kindergarten in Hampstead which Walter Yalding had chosen for him, thought quite a lot of his intelligence; he was rapidly overcoming his native accent, and altogether he was a nephew to be pleased with.

When the war came, it disrupted the household at Lawn Lodge a good deal less than most others. Walter had been very much one of the foresighted ones and for months had been making his preparations against its outbreak. The store cupboards were crammed, the coal cellar overflowed, and the wine bins were well stocked, for, though he didn't drink much himself, he prided himself nowadays on being able to offer his guests something really good.

He had told Annette that she was to buy plenty of clothes that summer—suits and coats he had advised and plenty of warm things for herself and Carol, and yards and yards of materials that could be made up later. He

put no limit on her expenditure over it and she enjoyed herself enormously.

He reckoned that, whatever happened, the garden would keep them in fruit and vegetables and, luckily for him, the gardener was a middle-aged man, rather lame, who wasn't likely to be taken away from him.

The cook, too, was an elderly French woman whom Mrs. Lestrangle had found for them and Carol's nannie was far from young and perfectly content to stay where she was comfortable, even though she had to do a certain amount of housework when the two maids were called up. The Yaldings, in fact, were sitting pretty

When the evacuation started Walter at once offered house room to his sister-in-law, Alice, and as many of her children as could be squeezed in. Adrian came, of course, and his ten-year-old sister and twelve-year-old brother. The rest of the family stayed with their father in Kilburn.

It didn't really work very well. Both Alice and the two older children hated the country and were restless and discontented there.

Adrian was all right. He regarded Lawn Lodge as his home, more or less, and loved it. He was sent, as a weekly boarder, to a sort of pre-prep school in Oxford and lived for the week-ends.

Eventually Alice went back to Kilburn with her older children and Lawn Lodge, almost completely self contained, settled down to the rest of the war.

The whole business passed over Carol's head and Annette wasn't much affected by it. She had to do some housework and do without a few luxuries; she helped quite a lot in village activities connected with the war, but outwardly she went on in her accustomed placid, pleasant ways.

Walter, on the whole, had a good war. He, so to say, put his business to bed for the duration. It lay, more or

less dormant and he looked at it from time to time to see that it was coming to no harm and prepared to wake it up again, more lively than ever, when peace broke out.

He got a propaganda job in the Ministry of Information which suited him very nicely. His H.Q. was at Oxford and it meant that he came into contact with all sorts of people who might, someday, be useful. He joined the Home Guard and rather liked himself in his new uniform and got keen on the whole thing. He was becoming an ardent social climber and his Home Guard activities helped him in that way.

Mrs. LeStrange hardly saw the Yaldings for the greater part of the war. Annette wanted her to come and live at Lawn Lodge, but she refused categorically. Apart from anything else, she knew that she couldn't have endured living at close quarters with Walter for more than a week at a time. She got no fonder of him as the years went by, and though she didn't actively dislike him, she was quite sure that she would if she saw much of him.

She got herself what Walter called "mixed up" with the Free French, and for stretches of time disappeared from sight. Every now and then she would ring up Annette to find out how she was, but she gave no information about herself except that she was well and very busy.

It was not until 1900 that the Yaldings really surfaced again and the upheaval that then took place was due to Mrs. LeStrange.

She descended on Lawn Lodge after two years absence in Paris, looking as handsome and as *soignée* as ever, beautifully groomed and dressed and full of energy.

"Now," she demanded of Annette. "Tell me about everything." Annette rang for tea, put another log on the fire and settled down for a mother and daughter gossip.

It was a horrid late November afternoon, grey, with a cold drizzle and a fretful wind, and the big drawing-room was well warmed and the acme of comfort.

The chairs and sofas were the softest and deepest and best sprung that had yet been invented, the carpets thick and yielding to the feet; not a draught could make its way in. Every piece of furniture was well made and in good taste; the chintzes were bright and pretty, yet it was the most undistinguished room you could possibly think of. No one's personality had gone to its making.

Mrs. Lestränge, looking around it as Annette poured out tea and passed hot scones, thought afresh how curious it was that her daughter had a mind so different from her own.

"You are looking well, my child," she pronounced, surveying Annette with critical eyes. "You are as plump and pretty as ever. Like me, in a different way, you keep your looks. And Carol? Is she still lovely?"

"Oh Mama! Lovelier than ever. Sometimes it quite frightens me. But she'll soon be in from school and you'll see her."

"You have not yet sent her away to boarding school?"

"Of course not," Annette's voice was vehement. "But we are a little worried about what to do with her next. You remember that she has been sharing a governess with the Vicar's girls and a few others, ever since she was old enough and now it's all coming to an end. Miss Withers is leaving. She says the girls are getting beyond her. It is so tiresome. She is such a nice woman. What will be best for Carol, I can't think."

"What are the other girls going to do?"

"They're going away to school," said Annette in the tones of one who speaks of a fate worse than death.

"Then why not send Carol with them?"

"Oh Mama! We couldn't do *that*! Why! The poor

child has never been away from home for a single night. She'd be miserable—besides——”

“ Besides, what? ”

“ Well—we've been so careful with her, if you know what I mean, and girls nowadays are so—so ill-mannered, and schools, from what I hear of them, are so mixed. I can't feel that it would be right to risk that kind of thing for her.”

“ But you, yourself, went away to school, Annette, and it didn't do you a y harm, and I believe that you were happy.”

“ Oh! I was, but that was before the war and things were different then and—well, I expect I was tougher than Carol.”

They both laughed and Mrs. Lestrangle asked: “ Well, have you an alternative? ”

“ We thought of a tutor for her and perhaps sending her into Oxford for some classes. Do you think that would be a good idea? ”

Mrs. Lestrangle let the subject drop for the moment. She wanted to see Carol before she made any pronouncement.

When she saw her she was, in a way, shocked. The child was, as Annette had said, lovelier than ever, so lovely that she was quite startling.

She was still small, but exquisitely proportioned. Her childish chubbiness had gone and her face now was a Madonna-like oval. Her hair was a deep gold, her eyes deep blue, with long dark lashes to shade them and her complexion was still the roses and cream of babyhood. She seemed both too young and too old for her age. There was something quite undeveloped about her, a placidity, an unthinkingness far younger than her years, but a quietness, a lack of normal girlish exuberance quite beyond them. And she was abnormally shy.

It didn't take Mrs. Lestrangle more than three days in the house to assess the position and then she decided to speak her mind. It was Walter to whom arguments must be addressed.

She found him very little changed. At fifty he was still spare and plain and ordinary looking. His hair was greying a little, there were lines on his face. He had gained in assurance but otherwise she considered him the same rather dull person, undistinguished in every way, as he had been when he married Annette.

She brought up the subject of Carol one night at dinner.

"I think that she is quite the loveliest child I have ever seen," she pronounced and Walter beamed.

"But," she went on, "I don't think that you are being fair to her."

"Fair, Mama!" Annette exclaimed. "Whatever do you mean? In what way?"

Walter listened attentively for his mother-in-law's answer. He was still somewhat in awe of her, in spite of himself, but he couldn't help admiring her and respecting her opinions. He recognised, in her, qualities which he knew himself to be lacking, which he would have dearly liked to possess—poise, breeding, knowledge of the world, among others.

She spoke deliberately: "You are shielding Carol from life as it is today in a way which I find almost criminal. She is fourteen, she should be thinking of growing up but you treat her as a child of ten. She has no friends at all but those few girls with whom she shares her lessons; she knows nothing of what goes on outside this rather dull village; she is painfully shy and has nothing to say for herself, and all this is due to the way in which you two have—I can find no other word—sequestered her. You have stultified her mental growth."

There was a shocked silence, then Walter started to

protest that Carol was a most intelligent child and extremely good at her lessons.

Mrs. Lestrangle brushed that aside. "Lessons!" she decided. "Lessons from books. It is lessons from life that she needs. The companionship of other girls and boys who have led different lives from hers, who come from homes of a different kind, who are mentally the age that she ought to be.

"You have kept her childishly ignorant—doubtless you call it innocent—but what do you suppose will happen to her when she meets the world as it is. She is going to be unusually beautiful in a few years time—a marriageable young woman. Men will flock round her. What do you suppose will happen to her? She will fall in love with the first attractive rascal whom she meets. Do you like that idea?"

She didn't wait for an answer to her rhetorical question.

"With her looks and the dot which you can give her, she should make a good marriage"—she noted Walter's involuntary movement of distaste at the last word—"but these things do not drop from heaven. They need some assistance from below."

Annette said quietly. "I know what you mean, Mama, but this is England, not France. You didn't manage my marriage." She smiled across the table at Walter.

Mrs. Lestrangle laughed, quietly. "But I should have been very willing to do so, my child. However, you arranged it for yourself, but you will agree that I provided you with a considerable number of eligible young men among whom to make your choice. I ask you, what men does Carol have the opportunity of meeting?"

Walter put in, hastily: "It's far too soon to talk of that kind of thing. Carol is only a baby."

"She is fourteen," his mother-in-law reminded him. "The women of my family marry young. The years pass

quickly. She should be going now to what they call boy and girl parties. In three years she should want more than that. "Where are you going to find partners for her here?"

Again there was a considerable silence.

Walter broke it at length by asking: "What do you suggest, Mrs. Lestrangle?"

"Send her away to some really good school and let her acquire some polish. She will meet girls of her own age; some of them will ask her to visit them; they will have brothers—need I say more? Give her three years at school and then send her to me, in Paris, for six months. Her Uncle Maurice and I can see that she goes to the right places and meets the right people. After that she can make her debut. I can arrange if you wish for her to be presented. You will thus have given her the opportunity of making a good marriage, even if she does not take it."

Having said her say, she changed the subject and Annette, at least, knew that she wouldn't refer to it again unless she were asked. That was her way. She, herself, could only wonder if she had done any good.

As a matter of fact, she had. Walter was no fool and though he hated to be reminded that Carol was growing up and wouldn't be for ever the child he petted and adored, he did see the force of Mrs. Lestrangle's arguments—not as regards marriage for the girl; he refused even to consider that—but he realised that parties and dances and that kind of thing were every girl's due and he knew that there wasn't much of that obtainable locally.

The upshot of it was that Mrs. Lestrangle was asked if she knew of any school suitable for Carol, and she did. A prospectus was sent for, enquiries were made and the thing was settled. The fact that some of the pupils came from titled families had considerable effect on Walter's decision. His social ambitions were beginning to soar higher still.

The house seemed strangely empty to Annette when Carol went away. She and Walter were alone together for the first time for fourteen years.

She was very far from being an introspective woman, but she began now to find her thoughts turned in on herself for the first time in her life.

It didn't come all at once; it didn't happen deliberately, but, gradually in the hours when she was quite alone, when she sat sewing or worked among her flowers—she had become an avid and most successful gardener—she began to assess her life.

She realised that her attitude towards Walter, as his towards her, had been imperceptibly changing over the years. He was no longer the most important person in her life nor she in his. Carol had the first place in both their hearts.

He was a kind, affectionate husband; she recognised that; she believed that he loved her, wanted her to be happy and did everything in his power to make her so, but should it come to a question of her happiness or Carol's, she would be the one to go to the wall, not the child.

She saw that her attitude towards him was the same. He came, and always would come, second. She was fond of him, she appreciated his good qualities but—well, the utter devotion, the unquestioning admiration which she had once felt towards him, had gradually gone since Carol's birth. She had given it to their child.

She asked herself why and got her answer, in part. Walter had changed; was still changing. He was so much less simple than he had been; less—the fact must be faced—admirable. He had been diffident once, but not now. He was sure of himself now, she thought, wanted no one's approbation or encouragement. He believed that he and his decisions were always right. He didn't like anyone to disagree with him; he couldn't bear not to be admired. He

expected her—and Carol too, for that matter—to be an echo of himself, to have no wishes or desires that weren't his.

Yes, even his adored Carol must be happy in the way that he prescribed, and her natural docility and admiration of him made it easy for her to do so.

She worshipped her father and he knew it and basked in the knowledge. She loved her mother dearly, but it was Walter who came first with her. She never questioned anything he said; for her, he was always right. Annette realised that, to put it bluntly, this was a state of things which fed his ego.

It was the first time that she had recognised this, but Mrs. Lestrangle had seen it long before and noted, with disapproving eyes, on her last visit, how much stronger the trait had become in Walter; Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street, in fact. It was partly that which had made her feel how necessary it was that Carol and her father should be separated for a time. The child was losing her individuality to him.

Carol didn't seem, to her parents, very different when she came home after her first term at school. She was, perhaps, a little less quiet and withdrawn; she chattered a little more, but the changes which they had feared hadn't happened. She didn't giggle or shout; she hadn't become a hockey playing hoyden; she wasn't pert or self-opinionated and they sighed with relief, and Walter patted himself on the back to see that she adored and deferred to him as much as ever.

The three years of boarding school went by uneventfully. Outwardly Carol didn't change much; she grew a little lovelier as she developed—there were no awkward ages for her, apparently—and she became less shy. She went away to stay with school friends and they came to

stay with her. It was not until after her six months in France with her grandmother that she seemed to emerge from childhood.

She had a wonderful time there. Part of it she spent in Paris, where her Uncle Maurice and Mrs. Lestrangle showed her all of that city, in its various aspects, which *une jeune fille bien élevée* could correctly see, and the rest of her time was divided between sightseeing tours and visits to country houses with her grandmother.

A deep affection grew up between the two. Mrs. Lestrangle treated Carol almost as a contemporary and the girl expanded under the experience. She grew to admire and respect the older woman enormously and her attitude towards her was quite different from that which she held towards her parents.

Mrs. Lestrangle delivered her at Lawn Lodge, stayed for a day or two to see that she settled down properly and then, half reluctantly, half thankfully, took her departure.

Before she went Annette thanked her.

"I can't be grateful enough, Mama, for what you've done. I've never seen Carol so enthusiastic in her life. You've not altered her in herself, she's as sweet as ever, but she's so much livelier—more animated, more talkative. Walter is simply delighted."

Mrs. Lestrangle smiled; a little secret sort of smile.

"I've enjoyed my time with Carol," she said. "She has become as you say, a much gayer person. You must try to keep her so. Plenty of parties this winter is what I prescribe. Let her have a lot of young people around her. Then, next summer, we will see about her presentation."

She paused for a second and then went on. "Annette, I have grown very fond of your child and I think that I have come to know her very well. There are two things which I wish to say to you before I go. One is a warning. Do not let Walter become too possessive of Carol."

Annette sighed. "How you do dislike him, Mama."

Mrs. Lestrangle shook her head. "Not dislike, my child, I could never dislike anyone who has made you happy and given you the kind of life which you enjoy. I admit that he is not the husband I would have chosen for you, but so long as he is a good husband, I am grateful to him. We have nothing in common, he and I, except our affection for you and Carol; that is all—but do not let him try to absorb her personality."

The younger woman sighed again, but said nothing.

"The other thing that I wish to say is this," Mrs Lestrangle went on. "Your Carol is not so docile and malleable as she appears. Somehow, under her placid exterior, there is a strong streak of determination. If she wants something sufficiently—and sufficiently is the all important word—she will exert all her strength to obtain it."

"I've never seen anything like that," Annette said.

"No. Probably because you have given her everything that she desires—so far. But the trait is there. Walter has it very fully developed—it accounts for his success, probably—and I think that she has inherited it from him. If those two should ever find themselves in opposition, my dear, you will have to be very careful."

Carol seemed contented that autumn, pleased with the mild gaieties which the neighbourhood produced.

Early in December she stayed at the house of a friend whose brother was having a dance to celebrate his twenty-first birthday.

Walter Yalding, who was generally most unwilling to let her go away, didn't mind so much this time—the Woodcotes had a title!

She came back in a state of excitement her mother had never seen her in before.

"Did you have a good time, darling?" Annette asked.

"Simply glorious, Mummy. It was a lovely dance. I enjoyed every minute of it."

She paused a second, then asked in what she tried to make a casual voice:

"Would it be all right if I asked Celia and Miles and another man for this next week-end?—as a matter of fact, I'm afraid I've half asked them. It's the Leverton's dance and they said bring a party if I could."

Annette knew the young Woodcotes and approved of them, but "another man"—

"Who's the spare man, darling?"

She thought that Carol flushed as she answered that.

"He's called Guy Benson. Lady Woodcote asked him for her dance—he's a friend of Miles' and Colin's."

"Oh! Well that will be all right, I expect. I must just see if it will be with Daddy."

It was very much all right with Daddy, who considered the Woodcotes a very good connexion. Lord Woodcote was a Magazine Baron, and, as such, a most useful man to be on good terms with. Miles, his elder son—it was Colin who had just come of age—and heir would be an asset to Carol's circle of friends, he thought, and if in the very far and dim and distant future, which he didn't want to envisage, she should get married, "My daughter, the honourable Mrs. Miles Woodcote" would sound quite well.

So, on Friday afternoon, the party arrived.

Carol made an unusual amount of fuss about it all and investigated the preparations which she generally took for granted—who was to have which bedroom, what flowers were being put in them, the menu for dinner—so on. Annette, remembering her own youth, sighed a little. Her daughter was growing up.

She had agreed to invite Guy Benson because he was a friend of the Woodcotes, but when she saw him, she

wondered if she'd made a mistake. He didn't seem to come out of their drawer at all.

He was older than Miles, to start with. He must, she considered, be nearly thirty, and of a type which she instinctively distrusted.

He was good-looking enough—dark curling hair and hot brown eyes; a tanned skin and a generally out of door look—but she felt that there was something rather shifty about him, though she couldn't have said quite what. His would-be man of the world manner, though it was meant to charm, failed with her, though it was obviously succeeding all too well with Carol. The girl accepted his marked attentions with only too much rapture. She hung on his words; she couldn't keep away from him and he quite openly pursued her.

Annette said nothing—to speak too soon would be inviting disaster, she felt—but she watched the situation with growing misgiving.

One thing which puzzled her was Miles Woodcote's attitude to Benson; he certainly didn't treat him as a friend. He actually gave the impression of disliking him.

Miles, Annette considered, was a thoroughly nice type. He was in his middle twenties, neither particularly brilliant nor at all stupid, but intelligent, beautifully mannered and possessing considerable charm. It was obvious that Carol fascinated him and Annette would have been only too glad if it had been he in whom the girl was so absorbed.

On Sunday she found an opportunity to speak to Miles alone. She didn't beat about the bush.

"Have you known Mr. Benson long, Miles?" she asked.

"Benson? Oh good Lord, no! About three weeks I should think, at the outside."

That reply, given in Miles' pleasant, rather drawling voice, gave her a shock.

" I suppose he's a friend of Colin's then ? "

He shook his head. " No. We ran across him at the same time, playing Squash at the Club. He's home on leave from somewhere or other. The East, I think. He was with some people we knew. Then my mother got into a panic about not having enough spare men for our dance, so we roped him in—he seemed pleasant enough," you know—but that's all we know about him. Matter of fact, Mrs. Yalding, I was a bit surprised when he rang up and said he'd been asked here and could he drive down with us."

Annette said, as airily as she could manage: " Carol thought he'd be useful to make a foursome for last night. Don't you like him, Miles ? "

" Not much. He doesn't improve on acquaintance, I find. Too pleased with himself. Carol seems keen enough."

She glanced at him quickly and saw that his nice, plain, wholesome face had taken on a look of disapproval. She wondered what her answer to his last statement ought to be and was thankful when the need for a reply was obviated by the arrival of a maid, calling her to the telephone.

Later on she tracked down Guy Benson and cornered him away from the others. He wasn't too pleased with this manoeuvre, but hid his feelings and behaved as a polite guest should.

" You're home on leave, I hear, Mr. Benson," she said, in an interested way.

He nodded. " It's almost over, worse luck," he told her, in that voice which grated on her just a little.

" You aren't looking forward to going back ? "

" Well, yes and no. I've had a magnificent time at home, especially just lately, and I don't look forward to saying goodbye to all that, but it's a good life over there—Persia, you know. I like it."

“ You don’t mind the heat? ”

He laughed, just a little too loudly. “ It’s never too hot for me! I’ve got every amenity, of course—my firm provides its top executives with good billets—I don’t know that I’d care for it too much without them—ice, fans, showers, plenty of service. Oh! it’s a good life, Mrs. Yalding, if you can take it. Plenty of hard work and plenty of play, too. Lots of parties—never a dull moment in fact.”

She asked him questions, then, about Persia, and found his answers interesting—and revealing. He talked well, he was out to make a good impression on her and gave his mind to the job, but he didn’t quite bring it off. There was something about him that she couldn’t like. She asked herself if it were prejudice, a dislike engendered by the man’s pursuit of Carol, but she didn’t think it was. If the girl had been equally interested in Miles Woodcote she wouldn’t have minded. All the same, she could see how he might attract a very young girl like Carol.

That night when she and Walter were alone she heard his opinions on the subject

“ When do these young people go? ” he asked her.

“ Tomorrow morning ”

“ Well, thank the Lord for that. I’ve got no objection to the Woodcotes—on the contrary—but this Benson chap! The sooner we see the last of him, the better. I can’t understand him being a friend of theirs. Miles doesn’t seem keen on him, either.”

“ He—he isn’t a friend of the Woodcotes, Walter.”

She repeated what Miles had told her and Walter looked relieved.

“ That’s a good job,” he said, decidedly. “ We don’t want him here again.”

“ You dislike him, too? ”

“ I do. There’s something not quite straight about him.

Annette. I can't put my finger on exactly what it is, but it's there all right. He's shifty and he throws his weight about, and he boasts, and I can't take the way he makes up to Carol."

"I'm afraid she's attracted by him," Annette warned him.

"Then she'll have to be unattracted. I can tell she likes the fellow too much for my peace of mind, but she'll just have to get over it. She's flattered, of course. She's only a baby, after all, but I shall just make it clear to her that we've no use for the chap and she's not to see him again."

3

WALIER YALDING'S "making it clear" to Carol was disastrous, as Annette had feared it would be.

She had begged him to be tactful and not to rush in. "Girls are dreadfully sensitive," she reminded him.

He was completely sure of his influence over Carol. "Nonsense! She'll take anything from me, my dear."

So he rushed in when he came back from business on the Monday evening.

Now was feeling complacent over a deal he had brought off that day and his home, when he got back to it, added to his self esteem. Everything that was his was just what he wanted it to be.

The sight of Annette, beautifully dressed as always sitting by the fire waiting for him, made him almost purr.

He surveyed her—a damned pretty woman, he thought—his. The pearls round her neck, and in her ears, and the diamonds on her finger had been bought by *him*, with money *he'd* made. The big, luxurious room, so warm and pleasantly lighted and welcoming—his too. His success had provided the maid who brought in the tray of drinks as soon as he arrived—yes, it was all delightful and did him credit. He felt like the Lord on the Seventh Day.

Annette got up from her chair, kissed him and poured him out a drink and one for herself afterwards.

As he stood, warming himself by the fire and sipping his whisky, Carol came in.

He looked at her with even more satisfaction. His, too. By God, she got prettier every day, he thought. There

was a sort of radiance about her this evening that made her positively enchanting.

She came quickly up to him, put her arms around his neck and kissed him warmly.

"Nice to see you back, Daddy," she said. "Had a good day?"

Without waiting for his answer she walked over to the table where the drinks stood and poured herself out a glass of sherry.

Her father watched her, frowning a little.

"Since when have little girls helped themselves to drinks without being told they may?" he asked in a voice which he tried to make playful.

Carol turned round, glass in hand. "If you mean me" she said in her clear, high voice, "I'm not a little girl any longer. I think it's rather silly for me to wait for you to tell me that I can have a drink, 'just for a treat', which is what you do every evening, Daddy. I'm old enough to decide for myself if I'll have one."

Her tone was sweet enough, but it had a determination in it which wasn't usually there, and even Annette was surprised at her speaking to her father like that.

He was a good deal more than surprised, but he ignored what she had said and rushed in. His feelings, whatever they were at her defiance, made him ignore all his wife's warnings.

"Your friends have gone, I'm glad to see," he stated in a voice very different from that in which he usually spoke to his ewe lamb. "I don't mean the Woodcotes. They're welcome any time, but that Benson fellow is not our cup of tea. I don't like him and I won't have him here again, and if you meet him anywhere, you can just steer clear of him—give him the cold shoulder, in fact. Is that clear, Carol?"

Annette, with all her power willing Walter to stop,

saw her daughter's delicate lips close tightly; saw her start of surprise; saw her hand clench.

Oh dear! Oh dear! she thought. Why will Walter never understand!

Carol said nothing.

Walter said: " Carol, did you hear what I said? "

She looked straight at him. " Yes, I did."

" And you understand me? "

She said, very low, very slowly: " Yes, Father, I understand."

She had never in her life called him ' Father ' before and she never called him ' Daddy ' again.

The subject was dropped then, Walter believed that he had said the last word on it and he was never one to flog a dead horse.

Annette's only comment on the affair was to say temperately: " You know, Walter dear, I think we must be very careful not to treat Carol like a child. I remember myself at that age and I know how girls feel about it. After all, she's nearly as old as I was when I married you."

Walter said: " Well, that was different, wasn't it? " Meaning that he had been involved in that, so the ordinary rules didn't apply.

By a stroke of very bad luck Annette came down with a nasty attack of influenza a couple of days later, and was so afraid of the infection that she wouldn't let Carol come near her. They sent each other messages but for five days they were never together.

However, Carol seemed to be getting on all right, Walter reported. She was allowed to use her mother's small car to her great delight, and drove herself into Oxford for shopping and music lessons and hairdresser's appointments and that kind of thing. She appeared to be perfectly happy and had plenty to fill her time.

Annette contented herself with that and thankfully gave herself up to the misery of 'flu.

When she emerged from it, and, limp and wretched, came downstairs again, everything seemed to be well. If Carol had resented what her father had said about Benson she had evidently got over it. She was cheerful and seemingly contented and delighted to have her mother about again. Annette felt that she hadn't been so fussed over and spoiled for years.

It was, however, only the lull before the storm, which was the worst that had hit Lawn Lodge so far.

Carol came in late to dinner one evening, and that, in Walter Yalding's eyes, was a major offence. He was a stickler for punctuality. However, he was being very indulgent to her these days and all he said was: "What has made my bad child late? Come and kiss me and sit down and eat your soup before it gets cold."

She obeyed him quietly, apologising prettily for her lateness, but giving no excuse for it. Annette saw that she was flushed and wore a look half of apprehension, half of excitement, and it worried her. She had been feeling increasingly lately, that Carol was beginning to be impatient of her father's domination. Walter obstinately refused to admit that his beloved baby was now a young woman and trouble. Annette feared, was bound to come of it.

Carol hardly spoke until the last course had been served and she was alone with her parents. Then, obviously making a tremendous effort of some kind, she said nervously: "Darlings, I've got some news for you. I'm engaged to be married."

Annette put her hand to her heart—an unusual gesture for her—and gave a little gasp.

Walter didn't seem to take it in. "Say that again," he demanded.

Carol said, half defiantly: "I'm going to be married to Guy Benson."

Walter heard that. He jumped up from the table, knocking his chair over behind him.

"What!" he shouted. "I'm damned if you are! I won't hear of it! That nasty, sneaking bit of work——"

Annette said, urgently. "Walter, be quiet. Don't say things you may be sorry for afterwards."

"I'll say what I like," he roared. "My daughter marry a fortune hunting cad that I wouldn't trust as far as I could see him——"

Carol got up without a word and ran out of the room.

Walter went on with his stream of abuse, so angry that he didn't, at first, realise that she had gone. When he did, he turned on Annette.

"And what do you know about this—this——"

Before he could finish his sentence, Annette quietly fainted.

He was frightened then, more frightened than he had ever been except on the night of Carol's birth. He couldn't bring her round. He was in a panic.

Eventually the doctor was sent for, Annette revived and was put to bed.

"You've been doing too much too soon after that very sharp attack of 'flu, Mrs Yalding," he told her. "You must take another week in bed and do absolutely nothing, and we'll soon have you right again."

Privately, to Walter alone, he said: "What has upset her, Yalding? She seems to have had a shock of some kind. I don't like the state of her heart. She must be kept completely quiet; no worries, no bother of any kind "

An hour or so later, when she had been left alone with orders to sleep, she rang her bell.

"Doris," she said to the maid who answered it, "I want Miss Carol. Will you find her and ask her to come to me?"

Doris went and came back to say : " She's locked in her room, Madam, and says she doesn't want to see anybody."

" Tell her I've been taken ill, Doris, and need her. I think she'll come then."

She did. She came running and as soon as she got inside the door of Annette's bedroom and saw her mother lying there, white and exhausted, she rushed to her.

" Oh! Mummy darling, what's wrong? Doris said you fainted——"

" I did, but I'm better now. I had to see you, Carol. I want you to tell me all about——" she faltered and then went on with an effort "——your engagement."

The girl was longing to talk about it and, so soon as she realised that that her mother was neither antagonistic nor angry, came out with the whole story.

She was madly in love with Guy Benson, she said, and he with her. She had been meeting him in Oxford every time she'd been in there, and today she had promised to marry him. She'd hated taking advantage of her mother's illness to be so secretive about it all, but it was her father's fault for taking a dislike to Benson, and forbidding her to see him.

" You know that nothing will make Father reasonable once he's made up his mind about anything," she explained, " and I daren't even tell you, though I wanted to. Guy said I'd better not."

Annette, feeling anything but well enough to cope, let her child babble on about her Guy and how wonderful he was, until she felt she couldn't bear any more. She didn't know what to do or say. She didn't want Carol to be hurt, but she felt that it was inevitable that she would be.

" How could Father be so horrible? " Carol demanded. " I know he's taken one of his prejudices against Guy, but he couldn't help liking him if he knew him better. He can't stop my marrying him, Mummy. He can't."

"I'm afraid he can, my darling. You're not of age, you know. Besides, he has right on his side, don't you think? You're so young and you've only known Mr. Benson such a short time and we hardly know him at all. I think, Carol, you must tell him that we must know him better before we can consent to an engagement. Give me time and I'll persuade your father to let you bring him here and we'll have everything above board."

"But there isn't any time, Mummy," Carol protested. "He's going back to Persia almost at once and I want to marry him and go with him."

That was more than Annette felt that she could tackle then and there. She needed time to think this business out to decide what was the wisest way to deal with it and she admitted as much to Carol.

"I really don't feel very well, darling, and I must think this over quietly. Wait until the morning and we'll talk about it again."

When morning came she was no nearer a solution of her troubles. Walter, scared to death about her health and seething with indignation about Carol, was no help at all. He just refused to discuss the problem with Annette and by sheer bullying, forced a promise from Carol that she wouldn't go to Oxford to meet Benson. He wouldn't have left the house himself, if he could have avoided it, but he had a big business deal on which couldn't be left alone.

In the evening, when he came home, he and Carol had the first real row of their lives. He lost his temper with her—a thing he had never done before—and really frightened her. For the first time she doubted his omnipotence, and while she still felt the power of his personality, still realised that he was the father she adored, she stood up for herself for quite a long time, and insisted that this question of marriage was one which she must decide

for herself. It was her life and her happiness which was in the balance, she said, not his.

Eventually she grew sullen—not a habit of hers—and when he thundered at her she refused to reply.

“And you’re not to go worrying your mother with this business,” he ordered, angrily. “She’s ill and she’s not to be upset. Grange says her heart isn’t too good and she’s to be kept perfectly quiet.”

That news made everything worse for Carol. If she couldn’t ask her mother’s help, she was indeed defenceless, she felt.

The next morning, she had a long talk with Benson on the telephone, but she told no one what had been said.

Later in the day she approached her mother.

“Grand’mère’s in London,” she told her. “Couldn’t I go and stay with her for a few days? I can’t bear being in the house with father just now. He will keep thundering at me and I can’t take it.”

That, thought poor Annette, worried out of her life and not feeling well enough to decide anything wisely, would be the best temporary expedient. It would provide an enforced lull in hostilities, and Carol would get the best of advice from her grandmother.

“Ring her up,” she told her daughter. “And if she can have you, you can go.”

So Carol went up to London that afternoon and Annette wrote a long letter to Mrs. Lestrangle telling her all about everything. She felt deeply relieved that father and daughter were to be separated for a time, and hoped that she, herself, would be well enough to cope when Carol came home again.

Three days later the Yaldings had a cable from Paris.

“Married Guy yesterday by Special licence. Gloriously happy. Flying to Persia tomorrow. Carol.”

Guy Benson hadn't wanted to marry Carol without her parents' consent. He'd had dreams of a good settlement and handsome wedding presents, but he was so much in love with her that he would sooner have married her without a penny than not at all, and he realised that it would be not at all if he didn't take his chance while he had it. He knew that if he went back to Persia without her, she was more than likely to be engaged or married to someone else by the time that he came home on leave again. He didn't distrust her, but he was well aware how young she was, how untried, how inexperienced. He had deliberately rushed her off her feet because of that.

He was inexperienced and, he had thought, disillusioned and blasé, but Carol had been too much for him. Her very youth had enthralled him and her beauty bewildered him. He had never seen such loveliness and he wanted it for his own.

He was not, by any means, a bad man, only morally weak and very lazy. He wanted the good things of this world badly, but he hated the idea of working for them if he could get them without, but Carol had an effect on him that he hadn't experienced before. He was willing even to work for her.

So he married her and took her back with him to Persia, where she created a sensation by her looks, and he was very proud of her and they were very happy.

Fortunately Walter Yalding opened the telegram which announced Carol's marriage, so he was able to break the news to Annette and save her the worst of the shock. It hit her pretty badly, all the same, and did her a good deal of harm, physically. That, luckily, made it impossible for Walter to ventilate his rage in front of her, and by the time that she was fit to discuss the situation he had become inured to it to some extent.

Annette's immediate reaction was that she wanted her mother, so Mrs. Lestrangle was sent for and came at once.

So soon as she was told the news she was full of wise counsel, which helped her daughter and partially soothed Walter's fury.

"It is done and you must accept it with a good grace," she ordered him. "This talk of yours of having the marriage annulled is nonsense. Is it that you wish to lose the affection of your child for ever? You are not pleased—who would be?—but you love Carol whatever she has done, do you not? Write to her, then, an affectionate letter. Say that you are grieved that she should have disobeyed and deceived you, but that you will forget and forgive—that is the correct phrase, is it not? Then, when she returns to England, she will come back to you, here, and you will not have lost your daughter, nor so alienated your son-in-law that he will try to keep her away from you."

Walter saw the sense of that, eventually, which comforted Annette.

"I don't understand Carol's being so deceitful, though, Mama," she told her mother when they were alone. "She never has been before."

"She never had the need before," Mrs. Lestrangle replied. "I told you once, that when she wanted anything sufficiently, she would go to any lengths to obtain it. I judged correctly, you see."

"But to say that she was going to stay with you and not even to send you the letter I wrote—that is not like Carol."

"Probably the man persuaded her," Mrs. Lestrangle suggested. "She intended coming to me perhaps—though when she telephoned to me she only said 'May I let you know if I can come?'—and he saw that it was too good an opportunity to miss. You would think that she was

safe with me and would not trouble yourselves. It sounds as though this Benson were an opportunist. What do you think of him yourself, Annette? It is of no use asking Walter. He cannot give an unbiased judgment."

Annette said: "I didn't like him, Mama, but I couldn't say exactly why. He is not of our class——"

"Nor is Walter."

"*D'Accord*." They were speaking French.

"But he has made you a good husband."

"He has what they call 'solid virtues' Mama."

"This man may have. Look on the brighter side, my daughter."

"I try to. I only want Carol to be happy."

"Naturally. Have you seen anything in this man which makes it unlikely that she will be so?"

Annette shook her head against her propped-up pillows. "Not exactly—nor did I find anything to commend him to me as a husband for my daughter. I should judge that he is *rusé* a little, weak, almost certainly and, probably, obstinate."

"But kind?"

"I can only hope so."

"Attractive?"

"In his own way, yes, probably. Not to me, though."

"Perhaps when you know him better——"

"Oh! That's what I hope, Mama."

That hope kept them going and as time went by and letters came from Carol proclaiming her happiness and ecstatic about Guy's virtues, it began to seem that it had a basis.

Walter got a letter from Benson, too, which comforted them. He made his excuses very plausibly, for his elopement, and gave Walter a statement which he admitted he should have made before his marriage and not after, of his financial position.

His salary, he said, kept himself and Carol reasonably well, and though it didn't run to the luxuries that she had been used to at home, she was being very plucky about it and seemed contented.

As Guy's total salary was, by Walter's standards, about enough to keep a single man in only comparative comfort, Carol got a handsome cheque by return of post—which was, perhaps, just what Benson had banked on.

Carol wrote asking for her last year's summer frocks to be sent out to her and Mrs. Lestrangle and Annette had a glorious shopping expedition and sent her a positive trousseau. Certainly Guy Benson was no worse off for his marriage.

When she had been married for nearly two years Carol wrote to say that she was going to have a baby and was coming home almost at once. Guy's leave wasn't yet due, but the hot weather was on its way and they thought it wiser that Carol should leave Persia before it began, so Guy would have to follow later.

Walter's excitement over the news that his precious daughter was going to give him a grandchild was almost absurd. He was so happy and proud that he hardly knew how to contain himself.

Annette was thrilled and apprehensive at the same time, and started making plans, in which Walter encouraged her.

The nurseries at Lawn Lodge which had been altered from time to time through the years, were altered yet again, done up and modernised and became nurseries again.

The largest spare room with its dressing-room, was re-decorated and dedicated to Carol and her husband, and the whole house seethed with preparations.

The evening before his daughter was due home Walter said to Annette:

"Look, my dear, I want us to concentrate on making Carol feel thankful to be with us again—no recriminations, no reproaches. We won't say a word about our feelings at her running off to get married the way she did, and we just want her to be happy."

Annette, who wanted nothing more than that, agreed without question—she rarely queried anything that Walter said. He was growing more and more resentful of criticism or disagreement as he got older, and she liked a peaceful life. She hoped that Carol wouldn't find his dictatorial ways difficult to take after her absence from them.

Carol didn't even notice them, at first, at any rate. She was so happy to be at home that she hardly seemed to think about anything else. She just gave herself up to the comfort and luxury with which she was surrounded, acquiesced in the arrangements which were made for her, and gave her parents more demonstrative affection than she had done since she was a baby.

Walter was in a state of rapture at having his daughter again. He was constantly saying so. He made plans for the coming child as if he were its father. Carol agreed with them all. Guy Benson was rarely mentioned, even by her.

There was nothing that Walter could think of to please her which he left undone. He was constantly giving her presents—a fur coat, a string of pearls, a diamond bracelet—it was as though he were showing her what she could have if she stayed at home—all the Kingdoms of the Earth. He, her father, could lavish on her everything which her husband could not.

Whether she registered this was another matter. Pregnancy had had the effect on her, as it often does, of making her completely lethargic both mentally and physically. She was content to do nothing and think

nothing. Time had ceased to have any meaning. Today was all and the only future which existed for her was the day her baby would be born.

Annette was troubled because Carol hardly spoke of her husband or his home-coming.

"It isn't natural, Walter," she told him. "She ought to be wanting Guy so badly that she's counting the days till he comes back. When I was waiting for her to be born, I could hardly bear you out of my sight."

"That was different," Walter said, complacently, but that didn't comfort Annette at all.

When, in due course, Guy did come home, Carol was pleased to see him, though without enthusiasm, but she liked to have him with her and depended on his company more and more as the weeks went on.

Even Walter had to admit that Guy was a devoted husband; content, apparently, to be a sort of gentleman in waiting to Carol. He went nowhere and did nothing without her and, as she wasn't too well, that meant a singularly uneventful existence.

Then an unexpected difficulty cropped up. The baby failed to arrive at the scheduled time and Guy's leave was up. He was very much upset over it.

"I shall have to go back in a couple of days," he had to say. "My passage is booked and there'll be hell to pay if I don't turn up on time."

"There'll be hell to pay if you leave Carol," his father-in-law told him savagely. "The very thought of your going before the child's born has put her into a shocking state. You can't go until it's all over. She needs you."

He told Annette that no decent man would dream of deserting his wife at such a time.

She tried to make him see reason. "If his job depends on it——" she argued.

But Walter wasn't in a state to be reasonable. He was

even more upset than Carol herself at the delay in the birth, keyed up beyond measure and worried about Carol who was taking things badly, inclined to be hysterical for the first time in her life, and tearful if Guy was out of her sight.

The upshot of it was that Guy said that he must go and see his London office and try to arrange something, and presumably he managed to, for after that, there was no more talk of his going back to Persia at once.

The baby was born three weeks late. It was a boy, and a healthy one, and Walter was ecstatically pleased.

Carol had a bad time and made a slow recovery, but she seemed very happy and contented when she came back from the nursing home, even when it was broken to her, as it had to be eventually, that she could never have another child without endangering her life.

Walter, the proud Grandfather, behaved quite absurdly over the child. He would pick it up out of its cot when it was crying, in defiance of the highly trained nannie, whose rules were those of the Medes and Persians.

"Look here, darling," Guy asked Carol one day, when the nurse had complained about this: "Whose baby is this, I'd like to know?"

"Oh Father's!" Carol assured him, laughing. "Didn't you realise? It's the heir of All the Yaldings and Father owns it."

That evening when they were having their drinks before dinner, Carol tackled her father on this matter of interfering with the baby's routine. "Nanny gets really worked up about it," she told him.

"I'm scared she'll give notice," Benson added.

Walter looked very annoyed. "If the woman has any complaints," he growled, "let her bring them to me. After all, I pay her, don't I?"

He said nothing more on the subject; indeed, he said

very little at all until after dinner, when they were drinking their coffee in the drawing-room. Then he put his cup down abruptly and turned to his son-in-law.

"I'd like to have a few words with you, Benson. Come along to my study in ten minutes, will you?" he said, and stalked out of the room.

Carol giggled. "It sounds like school, doesn't it?" but Guy was not amused. He knew quite well that his father-in-law didn't like him, and he wondered if this summons portended anything unpleasant.

Walter was sitting at his writing desk in the study which proclaimed that a firm of decorators had furnished it as their idea of what a study should be. It was comfortable and characterless, and Walter didn't use it very much.

"Sit down," he invited Guy without welcome. "I thought it would be as well if we put one or two things on a firm basis. You'll be going back to your job soon, I take it?"

Guy nodded. "Next week, I haven't reminded Carol about it yet, because I know she isn't keen on the idea."

"What idea?"

"Of going back to Persia."

"She isn't going."

"Not at once, of course," Benson put in hastily. "I have to go, but she can wait and follow on when the hot weather packs up."

"Carol stays here," Yalding stated. "Persia isn't the place for a delicate woman and a young child. This is her home and here she stays for the present."

"But supposing she doesn't want to? After all, sir, her place is with me——"

"She'll do what I think best for her."

That put Guy's back up and he began to lose his temper, even though he knew how impolitic that was.

"Carol's my wife," he retorted. "She will follow me in a couple of months——"

"Calm down," said Walter easily; "I take it we both want what is best for her. She's had a bad time over the baby and she's not fit to travel nor to live in that climate. Also, I'll remind you, your salary won't keep her and the baby in anything like comfort. I can give her everything she wants and needs. Don't forget that!"

"But she'll want to be with me, sir, as soon as she feels fit again."

"She won't want her child to have anything but the best, though."

The argument went on for some time and, at last, they reached a sort of compromise. Benson was to go and Carol was to follow him when she wanted to—or not at all if she didn't want.

"You can safely leave her and the child with us, my boy," Walter said, genial now that the situation was as he wanted it. "We'll look after them; you can be sure of that—and by the way, there'll be no need for you to send back an allowance for her. We will attend to that. And look after your own comforts too. See you have all you want."

He handed a cheque across the table and Benson took it with thanks.

Carol cried when Guy went—not much—and not for long. She was sorry to see him go, but she had the baby—Walter Lestrangle, called Terry, because you couldn't have two Walters in one house—and he was all absorbing.

Besides, she was feeling well again and she was young and, as her father pointed out, she had done herself out of the good time young people should have, by her precipitate marriage. So she was ready for it now, and Walter gave it to her.

Lawn Lodge kept open house those days. Adrian, down

from Cambridge with a good degree in Law, was eating his dinners now, and he filled the place with his friends. He had not wanted to go into the advertising business and Walter had regretfully admitted that he didn't seem cut for it exactly.

He had grown into a delightful young man and he had decided as young men do, that he was in love with his cousin, and that was great fun for Carol.

She was having the time of her life. Lovelier than ever, she was surrounded by numbers of men anxious to console her for her husband's absence and she enjoyed it thoroughly.

The baby thrived, Walter gave her all the clothes a girl could want, as well as a car of her own, and encouraged her to go out and about and ask as many people as she wished to the house, and if only she hadn't a nagging feeling that she ought to go and join Guy in Persia, she would have been utterly contented.

She said as much one day, and her father told her that she was talking rubbish. He was firm and factual over it.

He said: "You don't want to take young Terry out to that beastly unhealthy climate and leave him to native servants. You wouldn't enjoy having to look after him yourself, you know, and that's what it would mean."

"I expect Nanny could be persuaded to come with me," Carol argued.

"And who's going to pay her wages? Not Guy, on his salary."

That pulled her up short and Walter saw it and pressed his lesson home.

If she went back to Persia, he pointed out, they'd have to live on what Guy earned. There would be no father there to pay for everything, and she'd be doing her child out of all the things he ought to have—proper care and good English food and a healthy climate.

He pressed that home to such an extent and in such a way that he persuaded Carol that it would be utter selfishness to take her baby to Persia and that the child would probably die in consequence, and she would be the one to blame. Perhaps she wasn't unwilling to be convinced.

Anyway, she decided to stay in England—for Terry's sake.

Annette said to Walter: "That's blackmail, you know, and it isn't right."

"And why not, I should like to know? We don't want our daughter and our grandson to go off to that heathen, unhealthy hole, do we?"

She agreed. "We don't, but I know that she ought to go, Walter, and we ought to make it easy for her."

"Well, I'm not going to and that's that. I want her here, and I want the boy here, and I shall do everything I can to keep them."

"That doesn't make it right, Walter. You're trying to separate husband and wife and that's a thing which is utterly wrong. 'Whom God hath joined together——'."

"Don't be religious, Annette," he admonished. "It isn't practical. Carol's happy here and we want her. Let her stay. We don't like young Benson; he's no fit husband for her and the sooner she sees it the better. Why—why, she could marry young Woodcote tomorrow if she were free."

So Walter had his own way and Carol wrote and told Guy that, for the baby's sake, she couldn't come and join him yet—perhaps after his next leave, when the child was older—

And so that piece of fat was well and truly in the fire.

4

WHEN Guy Benson got Carol's letter he was in an extremely bad mood. It was a shockingly hot day, sticky and damp; he had been playing bridge the night before and had lost too much and drunk too much. He had a very nasty hangover and the world seemed a dreary place, hardly worth living in.

Carol's letter was the last straw, and Benson flew into a raging temper and sent her a cable which was the height of stupidity, ordering her to rejoin him at once. For a man who prided himself on understanding women, he could hardly have done worse.

Carol wasn't feeling too good, either, when the cable arrived, that is to say, she was in no mood to take orders from anybody. So she wrote in haste and told Guy that he was being absurd and selfish as well, and did he want to be responsible for their child's death, because she wasn't going to be, and the boy would certainly die if he were dragged out to Persia.

She was never a very good letter writer and this time temper had made her almost incoherent, but she got her meaning through, nevertheless, and it had the worst possible effect on Guy.

For some time he hadn't been too happy about Carol. Her letters weren't frequent, but when he did get them, they were full of what a good time she was having and he didn't feel that was right. She should have been saying how she missed him and how she longed for them to be together again.

For the first time jealousy entered his mind. Who was taking his wife to all these parties she wrote about so enthusiastically? Whom did she meet at them? She only mentioned, by name, her cousin Adrian and young Woodcote, but there were bound to be others. She couldn't fail to attract men wherever she went. His jealousy, unreasoning and unfounded, grew as he brooded on it. He didn't imagine that Carol was unfaithful. He believed that she was still the infatuated girl whom he had married—but he was jealous of the men with whom she might have been.

Thinking about the situation made it all worse and he got angrier and angrier and finally sent another cable.

“Insist on your returning immediately.”

He got a very brief answer to that—one word: “Impossible”; and it was signed “Walter Yalding”.

He knew exactly where he stood then. If his father-in-law had taken the matter into his own hands, the answer was final.

In a fury he rushed off to his firm's manager and demanded—not asked for—a month's leave—and didn't get it. In still more of a fury he gave in his resignation.

By this time he was in a mood of exaggerated tension, keying himself up, egging himself on. He rushed from extravagant action to extravagant action, booking an air passage home, selling up his household goods to pay for it and he was on the aeroplane and halfway to England before he appreciated how completely he had burnt his boats.

His arrival at Lawn Lodge was unheralded and most anti-climactic. The house was empty, except for the servants and no one seemed in the least pleased to see him. His spirits slumped, wildly, and he began to see that he had made rather a fool of himself.

The family didn't arrive home until very late that evening. They'd been to the races somewhere and dined on the way back. They were all three tired and his parents-in-law, after greeting him rather curtly and without enthusiasm, went off to bed, leaving him alone with Carol, who, up to then had shown only surprise at his arrival and no particular pleasure.

She was pleased, but not wildly so. She was very fond of him, but the rapt adoration she had once felt for him had faded. She had been so very young when she married him; her life had been so quiet and sheltered, her infatuation with him so complete and so sudden that she had rushed into marriage without thought. She was older now, more experienced, and there were many more interests in her life. She was not so unthinking as she had been. He was no longer the be-all and end-all of her existence.

Her first reaction, when she heard that he'd left his firm for good, was pleasure.

"Then we shan't ever have to go back to Persia!" she exclaimed, joyfully.

"Don't you want to—ever?" he asked. "I thought you quite enjoyed yourself there?"

"I did, but I shouldn't now, especially not with baby Terry. "But Guy——" the thought suddenly struck her, "what are you going to do for a living?"

He was easy. "Oh! I'll get a job somewhere. I'll have a couple of weeks holiday and then I'll start looking round."

When he did start looking, he was surprised how little he found and how far from easy it was. No one seemed to want his services at his own valuation. His idea was to start at the top and there seemed no demand for him there. He refused to consider anything else.

At last, rather disheartened, he suggested to Carol that

her father should provide him with a job in his business. She thought that was an excellent idea, and was surprised that Walter didn't agree with her when she put it to him.

"No, my darling," he said, firmly. "It wouldn't do at all. Guy knows nothing about advertising and I can't teach him. He'd have to start at the bottom and with his high-falutin' ideas he wouldn't like that. I've only room for the best at the top. Besides, if you want the truth, my girl, his record isn't too good. He won't find it easy to get a job anywhere, on his terms. He's blotted his copy book."

"Whatever do you mean, Father?" she asked indignantly.

"Now, it's no use taking it that way, my girl. He was a fool to leave his firm the way he did and nobody's going to want a man who does that kind of thing. What's more—I've made enquiries, so I know what I'm talking about—the firm wasn't overpleased with him and they wouldn't have taken him on again when his contract was up."

"Why ever not? They couldn't have had anything against him."

"They had, though, believe me, Lazy, not very efficient and a bit of a twister was what they had against him. I don't like hurting your feelings about him, Carol, but it's just as well that you should know what other people think of him."

She repeated that to Guy, of course, which didn't make him love his father-in-law any more.

Two or three months went past and still Benson hadn't a job and he didn't seem to care. He appeared to be perfectly content to be idle at Lawn Lodge, taking all that it could give him and making no return.

He had no money left by now, and Carol kept him supplied out of her allowance. Her father guessed that, tackled her about it and she admitted it.

"That's got to stop," Walter said. "If you give him another penny, Carol, I'll cut off your allowance. He's obviously not going to work unless he has to and he's got to recognise that, at once." He paused, looked hard at his daughter, and asked: "Are you really fond of him, my darling? If you aren't, you'd better get rid of him at once. He's no use to you and never will be, and the sooner you see it, the less you'll suffer in the long run."

From then on, he conducted a campaign on those lines. On every possible occasion Guy was shown up to Carol in the worst light and he failed to stand up for himself. Walter pointed out his every defect and weakness and Guy couldn't defend himself. Everything Walter said was true.

Guy, Walter stated to Carol, couldn't keep his wife and child and didn't try to. He was content to let her parents do it. He hadn't the money to take her out to enjoy herself and he was jealous and made scenes when other men did so. He was without pride—without guts and had the most inflated ideas of his capacities. And so on, and it couldn't help having its effect on Carol, because even she could see that it was, to some extent, true.

Annette saw what was going on and at last she spoke to her husband about it.

She said: "Walter, you're trying to make Carol disgusted with Guy. It's wrong. You mustn't do it. I don't expect I like him any more than you do, but upsetting Carol won't make things any better. She married him and she has got to live with him, so for pity's sake don't keep pointing out his faults to her. Let her think as well of him as she can."

"Why?" Walter asked.

"I've just said why. Because she's his wife and it's easier for wives to put up with their husbands if they can keep a few illusions about them."

" But why *should* she put up with him, my dear? "

" Because he's her husband—naturally."

Walter sat down opposite to her.

" Look here, Annette, let's get this clear. You're quite right—you usually are—I *am* trying to sicken Carol of this chap. What's more, I'm succeeding."

" But it's a wicked thing to do, Walter."

" On the contrary it's a good thing, and you ought to be glad that I'm bringing it off. Face the facts, my dear girl. Carol's our only child and we love her more than anything else in the world and our one desire is for her to be happy. She isn't now, but she still can be."

" I don't think she is unhappy, Walter. She isn't miserable——"

" Is that good enough? " he demanded, fiercely. " That our child should just not be miserable? I don't think so, any way. We want her to be happy, positively, radiantly happy, don't we? Well, she never will be while she's married to that—that—well, I won't say what I think he is—not in front of you."

" But she is married to him, my dear."

" But there's no need for her to stay married. Look, I think we're both agreed that she's made a mistake—she knows it too, now. That young man isn't a fit husband for her and she's beginning to feel it. He's not the kind of father that young Terry needs, either."

" Guy *is* Carol's husband, and he *is* Terry's father," Annette stated firmly.

" At present, but no sensible person puts up with a state of things which they don't like, when they can change it. I know all the Old Wives' tales about making your bed and having to lie on it. That's rubbish. If you've made your bed uncomfortably you strip it and remake it, unless you're an utter fool. You put a clean sheet on, too, if necessary. That's what Carol's got to do. She must get

rid of Benson and marry some decent chap who'll make her happy and be a credit to us all."

That conversation had no finality. Walter reiterated his arguments, Annette hers. Their only point of agreement was that Carol had made a mistake over her marriage.

Annette was intensely disturbed over Walter's attitude. In her code of religion and morals, divorce was a Sin, and she well knew that Walter didn't think it was, and probably wouldn't have cared if he had done. He didn't let ethics stand much in the way of anything he wanted.

Mrs. Lestrangle was in London just then, spending a couple of weeks in the small service flat which was always kept ready for her, though she didn't use it much nowadays. She was happier in Paris.

Annette telephoned to her. "Do you think you could come here for a few days, Mama? I can't tell you over the telephone, but I'm very worried about something and I want your advice."

Mrs. Lestrangle came at once, arriving on a Friday in time for lunch. She and Annette spent the afternoon together, alone, and she was in entire agreement with her daughter's feelings about Carol's marriage.

"I fear that I am not a very good Catholic," she admitted. "But good or bad, I know that divorce is a mortal sin and Carol must not be allowed to commit it. I take it the child's religion will make no difference to her?"

"I don't think she has any, Mama. You know Walter's views——"

"And you gave in to them and she was brought up without any. A pity. It does help in cases like these. What are Carol's own reactions to her father's plans for her."

Annette sighed. "She hasn't spoken to me about the subject at all, but she'll do as Walter tells her to, I'm certain. She's completely under his influence.

"Guy is not a satisfactory husband, although, so far as Carol is concerned, his worst fault is selfishness, but her father has been pointing out his other defects to some purpose and she's fully conscious of them, now. I've been watching—without being able to do anything about it—and I've seen how she's gradually fallen out of love with him. It has been rather heartrending, you know, Mama."

"Can nothing be done? "

"I don't know. It may not be too late, even now. If only Walter wouldn't try to influence her; to prejudice her against Guy——"

From five to six on most evenings the household at Lawn Lodge gave itself up to intensive baby worship. Young Terry was brought down to the drawing-room by his nurse and for an hour he entertained his adoring relations.

Walter was especially fond of this hour. He made a point of getting home in time to share at least a part of his grandson's performance. The nurse wasn't in evidence then, and he could pick the child up as much as he wanted without anyone objecting. He thought Terry the most wonderful baby that had ever been born; even more wonderful than Carol had been because he was a Boy—his heir.

On the evening of Mrs. Lestrangle's arrival they were all gathered round Terry, who was exhibiting his latest accomplishment in his play pen in front of the fire. He had just learned to pull himself up and stand for a few seconds. Walter was sure that no child had ever learnt this so young and this was a really noteworthy effort.

The baby got tired of doing his act and began to cry. Carol picked him up and Walter said to Annette: "It's this weekend that Adrian's coming, isn't it? Has the car been sent to meet him?"

"No, not yet," Annette told him. "He rang up about an hour ago to say he'd been delayed. He won't be here until that train which gets in just after seven. I've ordered the car to meet it."

"We're going to the races tomorrow afternoon," Carol announced. "Want to come with us, Father?"

"I notice you don't ask *me*," Benson put in, in a surly voice.

"Why Guy!" Carol protested. "You know you always say that racing bores you."

"Of course it does; racing is only amusing if you can bet and afford to lose. But that's not the point. I object to having it taken for granted that my wife can go off and amuse herself and leave me behind."

"Give me the baby for a minute, Carol," Mrs Lestrangle interrupted, tactfully. "He must become acquainted with his great-grandmother."

She broke off to laugh, softly.

"Is that not amusing?" she asked. "That I should be a great-grandmother!"

"Well, you don't look it and I don't expect you ever will, Grand'mère," Carol assured her, putting the child into her arms.

"*Hélas!* That is not what matters, my child," Mrs. Lestrangle stated. "It is whether I feel it which is the important thing. To be a grandmother—that is nothing, *n'est-ce pas*, Annette? One may be that at forty. It can be amusing. But a *great*-grandmother! I ask you. That is to be old, to be settled—*ranger*—what is the quotation? 'All Passion Spent!' I do not wish to be that. I do not feel it yet."

"I shouldn't think you ever will, either, Mama," Annette remarked.

"Indeed, I hope not. I am not one of those who say that as they grow old they live in their children's lives. I wish to live my own life, I thank you, and when it becomes no longer interesting, I shall be glad to die."

"Then I think that you will probably be immortal," Walter put in. "I can't imagine such a thing ever happening to you, M'am."

Carol got up and held her arms for her son.

"It's his bedtime," she said. "If I don't take him up now, Nannie will get into one of her tantrums. Guy, bring the dolls up, will you?"

She went out of the room, carrying the child and Guy gathered up toys and rug and play pen and followed her.

When the door had shut behind him, Walter looked up, venomously.

"That's the first useful job he's done today, I'll bet—and the last, the idle scrounger."

He got up and rang the bell and a maid brought in a tray of drinks.

He gave his wife and mother-in-law their glasses, poured out a stiff whisky for himself and stood by the fire, drinking it slowly and in silence.

Presently he put his glass down on the mantelpiece with a certain air of deliberation.

"That settles it," he stated. "I've made up my mind. I won't put up with that damned insolent young loafer any longer. I've come to the end of my patience."

Annette asked, quietly: "What do you mean, Walter?"

"Benson goes. I won't go on keeping him in comfort and idleness. I shall tell him so, tonight. Out he goes."

"Not tonight——"

"I'll give him a week to find somewhere else to live——"

and a job, too, if he wants to eat, but he's got to be out of this house a week today. I've had enough—too much, if you ask me."

"But Carol——?"

"She stays here, of course, and the boy."

Annette went very pale. "You're going to separate them, deliberately, Walter?"

"I am. That's the first step."

"Supposing he refuses to let Carol stay, or she doesn't want to?"

"That won't happen. Carol isn't going to take her baby anywhere where he can't be properly fed, is she, my dear? No, I've thought this out. I shall give him a week to go. That's fair enough. He can get a job that will keep him any day if he realises that he'll starve if he doesn't. I shall tell him that, any time after that, I'll give him £500 when he brings me evidence which will let Carol divorce him and another £500 when the divorce goes through."

Mrs. Lestrangle, who had been listening, silently, spoke then.

"You mean evidence that he has been unfaithful, Walter?"

"I do. It's the quickest and surest way."

"But that is mortal sin."

"Begging your pardon, M'am, it's no such thing. It's immortal common sense. I only wish I'd thought of it sooner. It'll be the best thousand pounds worth I ever bought. You don't want to see the child's life ruined by that young wastrel, do you? Well, I don't, and I'm not going to, and that's my last word on the subject."

As he said that, Guy Benson came into the room.

"Ah! Drinks! Good!" he exclaimed. "Just what I needed."

"To restore you after all the hard work you've been doing, I suppose," Walter snapped. "However, you'll

have to wait. I want a word with you, now. Come along to my study."

Annette half got up from her chair and laid a hand on his arm. He shook it off, ignored her low voiced "Walter!" and strode out of the room, his son-in-law at his heels.

So soon as the two women were left alone Annette turned to her mother.

"What am I to do, Mama?"

Mrs. Lestrang was silent for a second. Then she said: "It is in Carol's hands ultimately. It is she who must sue for a divorce—or not. You must influence her."

"Against Walter?" Annette was bitter. "I have no chance. She will do what he tells her and believe that he is right."

"I will try to persuade her that he is wrong; that it would be a sin."

"I wish I thought that you could, Mama. She has only once in her life thought that Walter was wrong and disobeyed him and that was when she married Guy. The marriage has not been a success; Guy has not proved to be what she thought he was; therefore, you see, Walter was right. So it follows, in her mind, that he always is and always will be right."

"He is a dangerous man, your husband."

"I'm afraid he is. He, too, is sure that he is always right."

"Yet—somehow this affair must be stopped. Carol can never be happy if she does this thing."

"I feel that, too. It is sin and no happiness can come from it. Besides, she and Guy could still make a good life for themselves if they were left alone. I don't like him, but he's not a *bad* man; only selfish and self-indulgent. If Walter would stop interfering I believe that they could get on as well together as most married couples do."

"But Walter will never stop interfering."

"He can't, Mama. It's—pathological with him. He was born to set things right—as he sees right."

"A power complex as they call it."

Annette nodded, smiling ruefully. "Nowadays, they think that if they've given a thing a label that's all there is about it. Walter's trouble is very simple. He is the man who knows what is best for everyone, and he'll give it to them even if both he and they perish in the attempt."

"A dangerous man, as I said before."

"Yes; but not a bad one. Oh! I know you've never really liked him, but, you know, you've never seen him as he really is. He has never been able to show his true self to you. I believe he's still as much in awe of you as he was twenty years ago."

"But that's not the point. I don't want you to misjudge him. He has so many good qualities. He's kind and generous; he's most affectionate and he genuinely wants to make people happy."

"In his way."

"Yes, that's the worst of it. He wants to manage everyone."

Mrs. LeStrange sighed softly and looked at her daughter for a second. "But you're happy with him, Annette?"

There was a long silence while the younger woman made up her mind whether she would answer that question truthfully or not.

At last she spoke.

"I have been happy with him, Mama. I'm not now. After our marriage, when I saw that I wasn't going to be able to change him, I taught myself to accept him as he was, faults and all, and I had many years of great contentment. I was the only one affected then, but things have changed. His faults—his great fault, the one we've been

discussing—has got beyond all bounds, and it's Carol's life now which he is trying to run. I've been increasingly unhappy about it—and I can do nothing. I'm terrified as to what harm he may do—with the best intentions in the world he thinks. Sometimes, nowadays, when I watch him ruthlessly dominating her, I almost feel as though I could kill him."

At that moment the door opened and Carol came in with Adrian Yalding.

"Who's going to kill whom and why?" she asked gaily. "Look who's here, Mummy."

Adrian, who was as good-looking now as he had been as a boy, kissed his aunt's cheek and Mrs. Lestrangle's hand.

"I'm in luck," he told the older woman, "I didn't expect to see you here. What a very pleasant surprise. It's years since I saw you and you haven't altered in the very least."

Carol laughed. "Oh wise young man! A Daniel come to judgment. You tell Grand'mère that she looks as young as ever and she'll love you for life."

"She looks younger," Adrian stated.

Mrs. Lestrangle chuckled. "You should do well at the Bar," she said. "Everyone appreciates a young man who can pay a pretty compliment."

Annette got up. "Come along, Mama, it's time we went and changed. Carol, give Adrian a glass of sherry."

They were gay at dinner that evening. Walter was in high spirits, so were Carol and Adrian. Mrs. Lestrangle and her daughter had too much social sense to let their own worries damp anyone else's enjoyment, and only Guy, silent and sulky, was out of tune with the party.

After dinner, in the drawing-room, they divided themselves up; Mrs. Lestrangle and Annette sat together on a

sofa, Annette knitting something for her grandson, her mother busy on a piece of exquisite *petit point*.

Guy had removed himself as soon as he'd drunk his coffee, and Walter, Carol and Adrian had their heads together over the evening paper, picking winners for tomorrow's races.

Soon after half-past nine, the parlour-maid came in with a salver on which lay a card, and offered it to Walter.

He picked it up, looked at it, and threw it in the fire.

"Damn and blast!" he exclaimed, heavily.

"What's wrong, Father?" Carol wanted to know.

"Nothing much, really," he told her. "But I'm annoyed." He broke off. "Put him in my study," he said to the maid. Then, turning to Carol and Adrian again, he explained.

"This is a wretched man whom I very much dislike personally. I've got a deal on with him but it's being carried out by Prout, my manager. I've refused to see the man myself over it, though he keeps on coming to the office and trying to talk to me. Now, he's turned up here and I believe he lives somewhere in the neighbourhood. I shall have to see him now. Well, I expect I'd better get it over."

He got up and started to go to the door, when an idea struck him.

"Adrian," he instructed, "if I don't come back here in about twenty minutes come along to my study and tell me I'm wanted on the telephone or something, will you?"

Twenty minutes later Walter was still away, so Adrian carried out his instructions.

He grinned as he sat down by Carol again. "I'm not surprised Uncle Walter didn't want to see that chap," he told her. "He's a nasty looking customer and they didn't seem to be having a very peaceful party."

A few minutes later Walter came back to the drawing-room.

"I want a drink, *badly*," he announced. "I'm having a tough time. Get me a stiff whisky Adrian, will you?"

"Have you got rid of your man?" Annette asked.

Walter shook his head. "No. He's a stickler. I've left him altering a contract for me to sign. I had to get away for a few minutes. I just couldn't stand him any longer."

He took his time over his drink and then, reluctantly, went off to the study.

He was back again in a very few minutes, looking annoyed and puzzled.

"Annette, have the servants gone to bed?" he asked.

She glanced at the clock.

"I expect so. It's after ten. Why? Do you want anything?"

"Only to know if any of them let that chap out. He's gone—vamoosed. When I got back to the study he wasn't there."

"How queer!"

"It is. I don't understand it."

"Perhaps he got tired of waiting and went to look for you and lost himself." Carol suggested. "Shall we have a search party?"

Adrian slipped out of the room and came back in a few minutes to say that, if the visitor had had a hat and coat, they were gone, and if he'd come in a car, it was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, he must have got fed up." Carol hazarded, "and decided you were too tough for him, Father."

Walter laughed. "It's he who was the tough one, my sweet. I'm not sorry he's taken himself off. He's got a nasty temper, that one, if he doesn't get his own way—and he wasn't going to get it from me. Oh well! I've no doubt I shall hear all about it at the office on Monday."

They all talked for a little longer and then went off to bed, for the race party wanted to start in good time in the morning and breakfast was to be earlier than usual.

But one of the party at Lawn Lodge never came down to breakfast again.

Walter Yalding was found dead in his bed when they went to call him in the morning.

5

IT was the young housemaid, Doris, who made the discovery. She hadn't been at Lawn Lodge very long, but like everyone else who had anything to do with Annette, she was devoted to her.

She took Annette's early morning tea tray up to her, as usual, put it down on the bedside table, drew the curtains, then, also as usual, opened the door into Walter's room and went in to call him.

It was his habit, as soon as he was wakened, to come and drink his tea by Annette's bedside and have a talk with her before he got dressed. She always breakfasted in bed.

This morning, instead of leaving by the door which led from Walter's room into the corridor, Doris came back to Annette.

In a rather scared way she said: "Please Madam, I can't wake Mr. Yalding and he looks rather queer. What shall I do?"

Annette, who was sleepily pouring out a cup of tea, sat up further in bed.

"Can't waken him, Doris?" she repeated.

"No, Madam, and he does look funny. I think he must be ill."

Annette was out of bed in a flash, pulling on her dressing-gown as she hurried into the next room.

One glance at Walter told her what the truth must be. She had never seen death before, but she knew that this was it.

Walter was very white and very still and when she touched him, very cold. She tried to find a pulse or a heart beat and failed.

She made herself keep quiet and controlled. Panic would do no one any good.

She went back to her own room where Doris was waiting.

"Will you go and ask Mrs. Lestrangle to come here?" she asked. "Say that—that Mr. Yalding's—ill—and I want her. Doris—don't frighten her, will you?"

"Oh, Madam! Is he—is he—gone?"

Annette bowed her head. "I'm afraid so."

She picked up the telephone, dialled the doctor's number, and when he answered, explained to him quietly what had happened.

"I'll come at once," he told her.

Just then Mrs. Lestrangle arrived.

"Walter's ill?" she began.

"I think he's dead, Mama. I've sent for Dr. Grange." Together they went to stand at Walter's bedside.

After a minute Mrs. Lestrangle said, gently: "I fear you are right, my poor child. There is nothing I can say——"

"No, Mama."

"It is very strange, is it not? He was well last night. His heart——?"

"I don't know. Mama—Carol will have to be told—I dread that."

They went back to Annette's room.

"I will go and dress," Mrs. Lestrangle said. "You will say nothing to Carol until the doctor has been?"

"I don't think so—yet, perhaps it would be better to prepare her. If she sees the doctor's car outside—Mama, do you think it would be better to tell her that Walter has been taken ill?"

Mrs. Lestrangle nodded. "Probably. I will do that, my dearest."

Dr. Grange arrived very soon. He had been the Yaldings medical man for years and was as much their friend as their doctor. It was a comfort to Annette to see him.

He spent quite a time alone in Walter's room. Annette sat quietly by her electric fire, waiting for him.

When he came to her, he said: "I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Yalding."

"It's true, then?" she asked.

He bowed his head. "You can comfort yourself that he didn't suffer at all. He died peacefully in his sleep."

"But what—what——? I mean *why*?"

"I'm not sure of that," he told her gently. "I hate to do it, but I must ask you some questions."

"Yes?"

"Has he been ill—unwell—lately? I haven't seen him, professionally, for a couple of years."

"No."

"Nothing on his mind?"

She shook her head. "Why do you ask that?"

"I'll explain later. Now, did he seem to be all right last night?"

"Perfectly—physically."

"What do you mean by that, Mrs. Yalding?"

"Well—he had a couple of rather trying interviews last evening; business ones. His mind was—upset—he told me so. He went to bed rather earlier than usual—he's generally very late, you know—and he couldn't get to sleep. He came to me about—oh! after midnight, I should think—and told me so and asked if I had anything which would calm him down. He said that he was just lying awake, going over and over these affairs and getting more and more wakeful. I told him that he'd find some sedative tablets in the medicine cupboard in our bathroom—the

ones you gave me, as a matter of fact. I knew there were two or three left.

"So he went and took them?"

"So far as I know."

"There was nothing else in the medicine cupboard that he could have taken by mistake? Nothing harmful, I mean?"

"No. Nothing whatever. What does all this mean, Dr. Grange?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure what he died of, my dear, and I'm trying to find out. Those sedative tablets of yours couldn't have killed him, not if he'd taken half a dozen, and you say there weren't more than three left. You're sure of that?"

"Certain."

"Then I don't understand it. The dose is two, as you know, but even if he'd taken three they shouldn't have done more than make him sleep very deeply. Of course, he might have had an allergy to the stuff—but it's so very mild."

He broke off and sat silent for an appreciable time. Then he said, slowly:

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Yalding, but I'm afraid there'll have to be an inquest."

He explained to her the laws relating to that, then asked her if she hadn't some relative who could be with her.

"You're being marvellously brave but you've had a bad shock and you shouldn't be alone. I know Carol's here, but she's only a child."

"My mother is here, too," she told him, "and Adrian Walter's nephew."

"Oh! the one who's going in for the law? That's a good thing. I'd like a word with him and I'll send Mrs. Lestrangle to you. If you'll take my advice, Mrs. Yalding,

you'll go back to bed for the rest of the day—and, don't be too self-controlled. Let yourself go. It'll do you good."

Annette didn't take any of his advice. She stayed in her room, but she didn't go to bed and she didn't cry. She sat gazing out of the window, silent and tearless unless anyone else were in the room. Then, she spoke when she was spoken to and no more.

Carol cried. She was dissolved in tears. She couldn't believe nor accept the tragedy which had come upon her. She wanted to talk, too, about her father, to anyone who would listen.

She found comfort from Adrian.

"Oh! I *am* glad you're here," she told him. "You loved Father, too. I think Guy hated him. He said: 'It's no good expecting me to go into mourning, Carol. Your father and I had no use for one another'. And he was so good to Guy. He was good to everyone wasn't he, Adrian?"

"He was certainly good to me," he agreed. "I shall miss him horribly. Next to my own mother, I've always admired your mother and father more than anyone, Carol."

"Grand'mère won't let me go near Mummy," the girl complained. "She says Mummy's had a terrible shock and she's better left alone."

"I think that's true, Carol. Aunt Annette seems half stunned. She listens to what you say to her, but I don't think she takes half of it in."

"Poor Mummy! It's awful for her. I'm not surprised she can't believe it's true that Father is dead. I can't properly realise it myself. I'm glad she's got Grand'mère. They understand one another, those two."

"Of course, I don't believe Grand'mère's really sorry about Father. She's got a black frock on and she looks grave and speaks quietly, but that's only because it's the

proper thing to do. She's a wonderful person. She always says and does the right thing at the right time, just as she always wears the right clothes, but that's only for convention. Underneath, she goes on thinking her own thoughts whatever she's saying. No one ever knows what she really feels if she doesn't mean them to."

Adrian couldn't be with Carol as much as he wanted to. He was perpetually needed by some one for something or other. He was the man of the house, for Guy had flatly refused to take on any responsibilities. He had, in fact, run away from them. He borrowed some money from Carol, got leave to use her car, and went off, so he said, to Oxford, and no one was really sorry to find him gone.

All sorts of things devolved on Adrian, from giving instructions to Walter's office to coping with the Coroner's officer.

That latter proved a difficult job and very unpleasant, though the man himself, an Inspector Henley from the local police station, was as considerate as he could be.

"I don't want to make more trouble than I have to, sir," he explained to Adrian. "But this kind of routine has got to be gone through in the circumstances"

"Of course, Inspector," Adrian conceded. "I quite understand that there are formalities to be gone through seeing that my uncle died suddenly. There'll have to be an inquest, I know."

"More than that, sir, there'll have to be a post mortem, I'm afraid."

"Good Lord! How beastly! But why?"

"Well, you see, sir, Dr. Grange wasn't satisfied as to the cause of death and our Medical Officer isn't either. They both seem sure that he didn't die from the sleeping pills he took, so as you might say, they've got to make

sure what it really was that killed him. You being a legal gentleman will understand that."

Inspector Henley was a pleasant man, Oxfordshire born and bred, a really good type in fact, and he carried out the duties he had to do with consideration.

He troubled Annette as little as possible and he was honestly grieved to have to intrude on her.

He took down a statement from her, practically identical with the one she had made to Dr. Grange, about the previous night's happenings; Walter's asking her for something to make him sleep, and so on, then he asked :

"You've no explanation of this sad business, Mam?"

"None," said Annette, dully.

"Your late husband" (she winced) "hadn't any what you might call enemies?"

"Oh, no! Inspector."

"He was well thought of hereabouts; that I do know; but up in London, in his business, he might have had a spot of bother with someone, sometime?"

"Possibly. He never talked about his business at home. Inspector—or hardly ever. There was this man who came to see him last night——"

"Ah, yes! Now, I'd like to hear a bit more about that."

Her hand went swiftly to her heart. "Do you think you could ask my nephew about that? He'll be able to tell you more than I can, I expect."

He left her alone then, and went off to find Adrian again.

"Now, what can you tell me about this visitor last night?" he asked.

"Very little, I'm afraid. He turned up late and my uncle was very annoyed. He said that he was doing a business deal with him."

He went on to repeat the various things which Walter had said about the stranger.

"You wouldn't say that they were on good terms, then?" the Inspector wanted to know.

"Definitely not. When I went into the study I could tell by my uncle's face that he was having his work cut out to keep his temper and the other man looked as though he hadn't even tried to keep his."

"He'd lost his temper, you mean?"

"Well, it looked like it. He was red in the face and his fists were clenched, and when I opened the door he was practically shouting."

"What was he saying?"

"'You'll be sorry for this and I'll see to it that you are', or something very like that."

"And then he disappeared without saying goodbye?"

Adrian nodded.

"But you say you tried to find him, you and your uncle?"

"Oh yes! We searched the ground floor, at any rate. We had an idea that he might have tried to find the lavatory, or something."

"No one at all saw him go, or heard a car?"

"None of the family, so far as I know. We were in the drawing-room and that faces the garden, you see. We shouldn't have heard any sounds in the drive."

"No, of course not. What about the servants?"

"They'd gone to bed by that time. My uncle would probably have asked them about it, this morning——"

"Of course, poor soul." The Inspector looked grave. "Now, Mr. Yalding, would you say that your uncle was upset about this visitor's disappearance?"

Adrian hesitated. "Yes and no. I'd say that he was glad the man had gone and he didn't have to deal with him any more, but didn't like the way he went."

"Did he say so?"

"Well, not in so many words, exactly. What he did

say to me was to the effect that he didn't like to feel that the man might be around the place somewhere."

"That's interesting. Do you know the man's name?"

"No. He sent in a card when he arrived, and my uncle looked at it and threw it into the fire. Elsie, the parlour-maid who brought it in, might know."

"Only one thing more about him, Mr. Yalding. Did you get a good look at him? Would you recognise him again?"

Adrian thought for a second. "Yes, I believe I would."

"Could you describe him?"

After a moment the young man said: "He was sitting down when I saw him, so I can't tell you if he was tall, but I'd think so. He was big, anyway; broad shouldered and—well, thick, if you know what I mean. He had a large red face, with a big nose and he was a bit bald. That's all I can tell you, I think."

"What colour hair?"

"I don't think I noticed. So it was probably mouse."

The Inspector laughed quietly. "A fair inference. Clothes?"

"A suit—greyish, I think. Oh! And he had big hands. I'm afraid that's all I can remember. I take it you want to get hold of him?"

"I do."

"Then if Elsie can't tell you his name you could ring up my uncle's office, or I will, if you like. If this man had kept on trying to see my uncle and they were doing a deal, the office should know who he is."

"That's a very good idea, sir. Now, I won't trouble you much more. Will you break it to Mrs. Yalding that there'll have to be a post mortem? I didn't say anything to her about it and it usually comes as a shock to the family. She'll take it better from you, I expect."

"Oh my poor Aunt!" Adrian exclaimed. "That on top of everything! Yes, I'll do it, Inspector."

"Thank you, sir. Now, I think I've seen everyone except the servants and Mr. Benson. Can you tell me where to find him?"

Adrian temporised. "He won't be able to tell you anything about last night. I've just remembered that he wasn't in the drawing-room."

"Oh! But that's not to say he didn't see the man from another part of the house. Where is he now?"

"As a matter of fact, he's out, at present."

"Indeed? Where?"

"He said he was driving to Oxford, I believe."

"Was he now. Not staying with his wife? Tell me, sir, what terms was he on with the late Mr. Yalding? Did they get on well together?"

"Oh reasonably! Fathers are never over enthusiastic about their daughters' husbands, are they?"

The Inspector smiled. "Never think they're good enough, do they? Still, were there any open quarrels?"

"I shouldn't think so. I'm only a visitor, you must remember."

"Of course. Well, thank you, sir. That'll be all for the present."

Adrian hated telling Annette that there was going to be a post mortem. He did it very gently, explaining the reason for it.

She listened quietly and, when he'd finished, all she said was: "How very horrible. Can't it be stopped, Adrian?"

"Not possible, my dear. It's the law and no one can prevent it taking its course."

Apparently she accepted that, for all she said was: "Thanks for explaining to me Adrian."

As he went away from Annette's room he ran into Mrs. Lestrage, going towards it.

He stopped and told her what would be happening.

"A post mortem!" she exclaimed, for once appearing startled. "But that is outrageous! Unthinkable. It must not be allowed."

Once more he spoke of the law's inexorability, but that didn't impress her.

"It must be stopped," she repeated. "My poor child has enough to bear without her husband's body being desecrated."

"She isn't taking it too badly," he told her. "Mrs. Lestrage, I wish she would cry. She's so self controlled that she frightens me. I can't understand it."

"But I do, Adrian; I do. You see, she has been brought up to conceal her feelings if they will hurt others. That is one thing. For another she has as yet not recovered from the shock of finding Walter dead. She hardly believes it is true, as yet, my poor Annette. Leave her in peace a little longer. Let the truth dawn on her gradually."

It was a trying day for everyone at Lawn Lodge. Even the household staff felt it badly, though they had never been particularly fond of Walter.

It was the atmosphere of grief, suspense and waiting which got them down. They couldn't help knowing that there was some mystery about Walter's death—the police questioning they all went through told them that, and they all read the *News of the World* enough to tell them what a post mortem was, and what the inferences were when the police escorted the ambulance which took Walter's body away.

The word Murder was first spoken in the kitchen, though in a hushed and tentative voice, but the idea gained popularity as the day went on, and last night's

Mysterious Stranger was heavily tipped as First Murderer. Guy Benson was a short head behind, not because they had anything definitely against him, but they all disliked him and they were agreed that he was heartless, "the way he ran out on poor Miss Carol this morning". They were disturbed, too, by being questioned by the police.

It seemed to everyone as if the day would never end! The hours dragged and still there was no word from the police as to the results of the P.M. It wasn't until very late in the afternoon that Adrian had a message from the coroner. Walter Yalding had not died from the sedative he had taken and foul play must be taken into account. No one was to leave the house without permission.

Adrian's anxious questions as to what the cause of his uncle's death really was were left unanswered and the atmosphere at Lawn Lodge became more strained than ever.

Guy Benson arrived home about eight o'clock in the evening and was met by a policeman who had a lot of questions to ask him. He was not co-operative or forthcoming and created a bad impression, but, as the policeman had the sense to recognise, he'd had a good deal to drink, so allowances were made.

It was snowing hard in London that afternoon.

Superintendent William Austen, C.I.D., stood at the window of his room at Scotland Yard, looking out over the Embankment, watching the gulls swoop and dive through the whirling snowflakes like disembodied spirits or the Ride of the Valkyrie.

The door opened and a voice informed him that the Assistant Commissioner would like a word with Superintendent Austen.

Austen took a second before he replied. The title of Superintendent still sounded unfamiliar to him as applied

to himself. He disliked it, too, as well as what it implied.

When, the new ruling had been made by which all Chief Inspectors automatically became Superintendents, he had rebelled. He liked his own work and his own status and disliked the desk work and organization which the rank of Superintendent brought with it. His rôle he believed, and certainly his strength, was detection and nothing else. He liked to be up and active, not chained to an office.

He talked of retiring and was laughed at by his superiors.

"What on earth would you do with yourself if you retired?" they demanded.

"Go and live in the country, keep a dog, and cultivate my garden," he told them.

The statement was greeted with derision. "You'd be sick of it in six months. The first time you read in the papers of a nice juicy murder with a psychological approach, you'd be back here, begging for the job."

He knew that was probably true. The investigation of crime, murder for choice, was his job—his chosen job, and though he had many other interests in life, none of them absorbed him as that did.

So, of course, he didn't resign; he accepted his promotion, determined to let it make as little difference to his work as possible, and, as he was a very valued asset to the C.I.D., no objections were raised.

The A.C. looked up and grinned as Austen went into his room. They had been friends for many years out of working hours as well as in them.

"Hello, William," he welcomed him. "How's life and works?"

"Oh! Not too bad, I suppose, considering the weather. I hate snow in London."

"Do you like it better in the country?"

"I'm all for it there, till it starts melting! I wish I could see it there."

"Wish granted. There's a job for you in the deep depths of Oxfordshire; a neat murder, snow falling fast and temperatures below freezing."

"Oxfordshire? What do they want us for? The same old thing, I suppose—local police baffled, as the papers say, and they call us in when everything's stale and cold."

"You malign them this time. They only found the body this morning. The corpse was alive last night. No, the trouble is that the local police have a chickenpox epidemic, of all things, and they're snowed under with work as well as weather and they've called for help."

"Oh! Details?"

"Practically none. The corpse is a certain Walter Yalding—an advertising man——"

"I know the name."

"It's a big firm, I believe. Well, he was found dead in bed this morning, not a natural death, and suicide or accident are out. So you take over as from now."

"Right. Can I have Curtis and Flyte?"

The A.C. laughed. "You can. I knew you'd ask for them. I believe they do your work for you. You sit round reading and listening to symphony concerts while they get on with the job."

"Have you only just found that out?" Austen enquired with an air of exaggerated surprise. "It's a well known fact among most of my friends. I learn a page of the Oxford Book of Quotations by heart every day—our erudite police, you know—and let the B.B.C. Third Programme educate me in the evenings, while Curtis and Flyte crawl round on their hands and knees looking for clues and I take the credit. But, seriously, Alec, just give me what details you've got about this, and I'll be off. Let me get there before anyone else starts crawling round!"

William Austen, Inspector Curtis and Sergeant Flyte were a well tried team. Austen and Curtis had worked together for many years and thoroughly understood one another's ways. They complemented each other—Austen quick, intuitive, imaginative; Curtis solid, thorough, factual. They were equally unlike in appearance, too. Austen was tall and distinguished, with an air of austerity about him, which was belied by his most charming smile. Curtis prided himself on looking just like everybody else. It was one of his assets. He could get by without being noticed.

Flyte, the youngest member of the team, modelled himself on Austen, for whom he entertained a hero worship. He tried to copy his methods, his clothes and his manner, which wasn't easy for they were intensely individual. He was, none the less, a very intelligent young man who got on well with almost everyone.

The three detectives set off, in the late afternoon, by train for Oxford. Austen would have preferred going by car, but the reports coming in about road conditions didn't encourage the idea.

They were met at the station by Inspector Henley, who welcomed them with enthusiasm and was particularly pleased to meet Superintendent Austen, whose name and work he knew well.

"Now, what would you like, sir?" Inspector Henley asked when they were all in his car. "Will you come to our station and I'll give you details, or will you have your dinner first?"

Austen considered. "How far away is it?"

"Best part of seven miles."

"Roads bad?"

"They're rather tricky in places. It's stopped snowing though, so driving will be a bit easier. I can't go fast though, I'm afraid."

"Well," Austen said, "we three are all rather cold and we could do with a drink, too. Have you fixed up rooms for us somewhere?"

"Yes, sir, at the Dog and Duck. It's a good pub and they feed you well, I'm told."

"Good. Let's go straight there then, if that's all right for you. I suggest that you should have dinner with us, Inspector; and we can talk afterwards."

The Dog and Duck, known locally as The Dog, was a very good pub. It was an old house which had been modernised without having its character spoilt, and the landlord, Bob Sonning, thoroughly understood both comfort and cooking.

The place was warm, everywhere, with huge fires in the public rooms and radiators in the bedrooms. The beer was well kept and the dinner plain but excellent and served in the private room which Inspector Henley had engaged for his colleagues.

That room, too, had a roaring fire and some comfortable chairs, and when they had eaten, the four policemen settled themselves down to business.

Inspector Henley produced his notebook.

"It won't take me long to give you the facts we've got on this case," he said. "because there aren't many. It was only this afternoon that we got the results of the post mortem which proved that we had a murder to deal with, and our Chief Constable decided that he'd have to ask for help from the Yard. So we've only done preliminary enquiries. The rest is over to you."

"Now, here are the bare bones."

"The deceased is Walter Yalding, owner of an Advertising agency, in London. He's been living here since before the war, at a largish house called Lawn Lodge, with his wife and daughter. He appeared to be wealthy and the family is well thought of locally."

“ Last night he went to bed as usual in good health. This morning he was found dead in his bed.

“ At first the idea was that he must have taken an overdose of sleeping tablets. The autopsy established that, though he had taken a biggish dose, it wasn't enough to kill, only to make him sleep very heavily.

The cause of death was suffocation. He had been smothered while he slept.”

6

INSPECTOR HENLEY had reduced his notes to the barest facts and when he'd finished laying those before the Scotland Yard men, he turned to Austen.

"Now, Superintendent, any questions?"

"At least twenty," Austen chuckled. "Let's start with this Mysterious Stranger. Have you discovered anything about him?"

"Not a thing, sir. The parlour-maid who let him in confirms young Mr. Yalding's description of him, that is all."

"She doesn't even remember his name?"

"No. He didn't give it, only handed her his card, which she didn't look at."

"At a guess, it's 'Arris," Austen murmured. "He has an ancient and a fish-like smell."

Inspector Henley looked non-comprehensive, and young Sergeant Flyte kindly interpreted.

"The Superintendent means that there's no such person and he's a Red Herring anyway."

Henley smiled. "I rang up Mr. Yalding's office to see if they could throw any light on the question."

"And could they?"

"No, sir. They said the description didn't fit any client they knew of."

"Qucer. I'll get someone sent to that office on Monday morning. Now, we'll leave this man, for the moment. What do the doctors have to say about this death?"

"Well, the idea seems to be that Mr. Yalding took, or

was given, about twice the prescribed dose of the sleeping stuff and that while he was in a heavy sleep, someone put a pillow over his face. There was fluff and stuff in the lungs."

"Time of death? "

"Mrs. Yalding says he came for the pills about midnight. The M.O. says allow an hour for it to take effect. Therefore he was killed after 1 A.M. and he was cold at 7 A.M. He estimates—but you know these medical men, sir. That's the nearest he'll go—he estimates the time of death as between 1.30 and 4 A.M.

"Yes, that's a good working guess, I should say. Did the servants find everything as usual this morning? Doors and windows locked and so on."

"Yes. The only open windows were in the rooms where people were sleeping on the first floor."

"Which more than suggests that, unless the Strange Visitor hid in the house last night, murdered Yalding, and got out this morning *after* the servants came down, Yalding was killed by one of the household."

"It does look like it, sir, I'm afraid, but there is just a possibility—Mr. Yalding slept with his windows open and they lead out on to a balcony. Any active man could have climbed up there from the outside."

"Any signs of that? "

Inspector Henley shook his head. "The snow hadn't started last night and there was a very hard frost. The ground wouldn't have taken prints."

"There might have been some on the rail of the balcony or the window frame."

Henley looked disconcerted. "I'm afraid we didn't think of that. As a matter of fact, the idea of the balcony only came to me as a sort of afterthought."

"Which I'll bear in mind," Austen promised. "Apart, then, from an outsider climbing in, the inference is that

Yalding's murderer is someone who spent the night in the house. Someone, in fact, on this list you've given me. Now, which of them had a motive for killing him? "

The Inspector shook his head.

Austen asked: " No ideas? "

" None."

" What about the money angle? Yalding was a wealthy man, I take it? Who inherits? "

" I don't know, sir."

" Is there a will? "

" I believe so. His lawyer is bringing it down to-morrow."

" Ah! So we shall have to wait for that. In the meantime, let's consider the personal angle. Did someone dislike Yalding enough to kill him just because of that. Have you lived long in this neighbourhood? "

" Best part of ten years."

" Then you know all about these people, I expect. Are the Yaldings old inhabitants? "

" Came here a matter of twenty years ago. Very well thought of they are."

" Now, tell me something about Yalding—as a man, a person."

Henley hesitated. " Well, that's not easy, Super. We didn't see much of him in the village."

" I thought you said he was well liked."

" Well thought of, I said. That's different. He was good for the village, if you know what I mean. Dealt with the local shops as far as possible; paid his bills—big ones, too—promptly; he was a good employer, treated his servants well—mostly local people, too; paid good wages and gave fair outings. He always gave generously to local charities—the Scouts, the Cricket Club, that kind of thing—but he didn't—mix—as you might say. Now, Mrs. Yalding—that's different. She's gentry. He wasn't. There isn't a

lady better liked for miles round. Not that anyone has anything against him, that I've ever heard of, but she's the one everybody likes."

"And how did they get on together?"

"A model couple. Devoted. People remarked on it."

"Then"—Austen glanced at his list—"the daughter, Mrs. Benson?"

Henley beamed. "We still call her Miss Carol, though she is married. She was born at Lawn Lodge, you see, and grew up here. She belongs. Everyone likes her. Such a picture she is, too."

"On good terms with her father?"

"She thought the world of him and he fair doted on her."

Austen asked: "What about her husband?"

"I wouldn't know much about him, sir. He doesn't come from these parts and he only comes down here when he's on leave from some place abroad where he works."

"So you've no idea what terms he was on with Mr. Yalding?"

"Not of my own knowledge, Super. The servants say not good. They'd no use for each other."

"Why? Any idea?"

Henley looked doubtful. "Well, I couldn't say, not of my own knowledge, but people do talk. They seem to think Mr. Yalding didn't think Mr. Benson was good enough for Miss Carol, but there—fathers never do, do they, or not often."

"I wouldn't know," said Austen, laughing. "I've never been a father nor a son-in-law, Inspector. I'm a contented bachelor."

"Well, let's get on with this list, Mrs. Lestranger—Mrs. Yalding's mother. What do you know about her?"

"A very handsome lady, spends most of her time in

France, but of course, she's been coming here from time to time ever since the Yaldings settled here."

"Did she get on with her son-in-law?"

"So they say, a fair treat. Never put her foot wrong with him; no criticisms or quarrels and he seemed to think she was something quite special."

"She sounds it. A model mother-in-law, in fact."

The Inspector grinned. "Well, I wish mine 'ud take a leaf out of her book."

Austen laughed. "Now, lastly, Adrian Yalding, another visitor, I see. What relation?"

"Mr. Yalding's nephew. A very upstanding young man, well liked everywhere. Spends a lot of time here. Very fond of his uncle and aunt he seems to be, and they of him."

"So everything in the family appears to be lovely except young Benson. Hmm. What about the servants?"

"They've nothing to say against Mr. Yalding."

"And nothing for him?"

"Well—not much. They didn't like him and they didn't dislike him. Sort of as if he didn't register one way or the other. They don't like Benson. Super, I can tell you that. They say he doesn't treat them like human beings."

"Not a popular type, I take it. Well, that seems to account for the household—none of the servants under notice? None recently dismissed with a grievance?"

"Nothing like that, at all."

Austen got up and stretched. "I think we can call it a day, then, if you've nothing else to tell me."

Henley decided that he hadn't, so all four policemen went down to the bar for a last drink and after that, Henley took himself off.

When he'd gone, Austen turned to his Sergeant.

"Who's our likely suspect, young Flyte?"

Flyte chuckled. "Oh! I know the answer to that one,

Sir. Benson, but he didn't do it, of course, because he's the obvious person. Right? "

"Oh! Absolutely. We shall have you writing detective novels, soon."

"I might, at that," Flyte chuckled; "if it didn't look so much like hard work."

The saloon bar was empty now, except for the three policemen and closing time was only a few minutes off.

Bob Sonning, the landlord, was washing and polishing glasses. Austen ordered one more round.

"You don't need to hurry, Sir, seeing you're staying in the house." He pushed the glasses over the bar and leant forward confidentially.

"Bad business this, Sir. I know what you're here for, of course."

"Yes, it's bad as you say," Austen agreed. "D'you know the people concerned, Sonning? "

"Of them, Sir, of them. You can't help hearing talk in the bar sometimes. I don't know that I've ever more than just set eyes on Mr. and Mrs. Yalding, but Miss Carol as they call her, and Mr. Adrian, they come in here from time to time and bring their friends, too. Nice young people they are."

"So I've heard. What about Mr. Benson? "

Sonning shook his head. "He doesn't seem to fit in with the others, somehow. He hardly ever comes in with them, though he's been in once or twice by himself. Last night he was in, come to that."

"Was he now? What time would that be? "

"I couldn't say, Sir, not exactly. Nineish—quarter past perhaps."

"Alone? "

"Very much so if you know what I mean. Didn't pass the time of day with anybody; hardly spoke when he was spoken to. I said: 'Cold night' or something and he

didn't do more than grunt. Slapped some money down on the bar and said: 'Double whisky and make it snappy', or something. Not even a please or a thank you."

"Did he seem as if something had upset him?"

"I'd say so. Sat there, surly as you please, putting down his drinks and never saying a word."

"Did he drink a lot?"

"As much as was good for him. Don't get me wrong, Sir. He didn't have too much, not in this house, but I wouldn't have gone on serving him much longer. Putting them back fast he was."

"Like that? I see. What time did he leave?"

"That I do know, because I happened to look at the clock. Ten, it was, as near as makes no difference. I thought to myself: 'You'll have time for a couple more at the Queen's Head before closing time'. Half past ten that is in Oxfordshire, Sir, as I expect you've noticed."

"Where's the Queen's Head, Sonning?"

"Along the other end of the village, Sir. Next the post office."

"I'll look in there sometime. You see, Sonning, I've got to make sure where everyone concerned with Mr. Yalding was last night. Just a matter of routine, you know. We have lots of that."

He finished his drink and put down his glass. "Well," he said, turning to Curtis and Flyte. "I don't know about you, two, but I'm off to bed."

It snowed again before the night was over, and stopped before dawn and there was a sharp frost.

Morning came with a clear sky of the deepest blue and bright sunshine. Austen put his head out of the Dog and Duck before he went to breakfast and what he saw rejoiced his beauty loving soul.

Pure, clean snow lay all around him, such as one never

sees in London. There were a few wheel tracks along the village street, and beyond that, the rooftops were smooth and shining white. Above them a little wood of conifers rose steeply, every branch laden with its white load, glinting in the sun.

The cold was sharp and Austen, without an overcoat, couldn't take it for long, but his day had been started well, he felt.

The three policemen had hardly finished breakfast when Austen was called to the telephone.

When he came back he was looking cheerful.

"This chap Henley has laid everything on very neatly," he reported. "There's a car at our disposal, to start with. Then, the Chief Constable will be at Henley's office at 10—very decent of him to save me time and journey, I think. The Yaldings own doctor will look in there about 10.30 in case there's anything we want to ask him and Yalding's lawyer will be at Lawn Lodge soon after eleven. It all fits in nicely, so let's get going."

The short walk to the police station, over the crisp snow, was exhilarating and the big fire which awaited them there, welcome. The Chief Constable was accommodating and easy to get on with and he was only too pleased to leave everything in Austen's hands, so that part of the morning's work was soon over.

Then Dr. Grange turned up and added his contribution.

In answer to Austen's questions he said: "I don't think I can add much to what you probably already know from the Police Surgeon's report, Superintendent. I merely found that Mr. Yalding hadn't, in my opinion, died a natural death, and I therefore notified the Coroner to that effect."

Austen nodded. "But I think you know more about the provenance of the narcotic or whatever it was, than anyone else, Doctor."

"Probably. It was a harmless proprietary thing, very mild. Mrs. Yalding has been my patient for many years and I ordered the stuff for her when she complained, a few months ago, of persistent insomnia. She's not a very strong woman, though she'd never admit it, and though she appears placid, she isn't. Lack of sleep would do her a lot of harm, so I prescribed these tablets more for their psychological effect than anything else. I thought, you see, that the sleeplessness might easily be a nervous reaction, and that if she believed that she was going to sleep, she would. Well, it worked. She broke the insomnia habit in a few nights and it has never returned, so she tells me. In consequence, the prescription was never repeated. That means that she never finished the first lot and when her husband asked her for something to make him sleep, she told him to take some of the tablets which were left."

"I understand that the stomach content showed that he took more than the prescribed dose."

"Yes. Presumably there were more tablets left than Mrs. Yalding had thought and he took the lot. I found the empty bottle on his bathroom shelf."

"And that's all you know about that?"

"Yes."

"Yalding was a patient of yours, too?"

"I am the family doctor, but I rarely had to treat him."

"A healthy man?"

"Extremely."

"As a man, then, not a patient, what did you think of him?"

Dr. Grange smiled. "*De mortuis* and all that, notwithstanding, I didn't care for him much."

"Why not?"

"I can't say, exactly. He wasn't an easy man to like. Self assertive—no, I really can't be precise."

"Just not a sympathetic character?"

"Exactly."

"And Mrs. Yalding?"

"Exactly the opposite. She's a charming woman."

"Did they get on well together?" Austen wanted to know.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Well, one half never knows how the other half lives, but to all appearances, excellently. He was really devoted to her. Whenever she was ill, he got into an absolute tizzy."

"And if he were ill, how did she react?"

"The worst I ever knew him to have was a mild influenza. She was calm over it, as she always is, nursed him well and competently and didn't fuss. That's not her way, you see."

"That's all you can tell me about them, then?"

"I think so."

Austen considered for a moment, then he asked: "I suppose you can't suggest any reason why anyone should want to kill him?"

Dr. Grange shook his head. "No," he said, slowly. "Not anyone in particular."

"What do you mean by that, Doctor?"

The other man laughed. "I think I mean that I don't know of anyone, but I can imagine possibly some of his business associates feeling like it. He could be thoroughly exasperating, you know. He was one of those men who always have to be right."

When Dr. Grange had gone, Austen turned to Curtis. "Did you get anything from that?"

Curtis nodded. "Putting it together with the other bits we've heard, it seems to establish that Yalding wasn't exactly a lovable type."

"He doesn't sound like it. Interesting, isn't it? Helpful, too, in a way."

"How does it help, Sir?" Flyte wanted to know.

"Well, you see, it means that if no financial angle emerges from the man's will, it must be from his character that the motive for his murder will appear."

When the detectives arrived at Lawn Lodge they were shown into Walter Yalding's study, where Adrian Yalding met them.

"I'm in charge in the house," he explained, when he'd introduced himself. "My aunt isn't well enough and she has asked me to do it for her. Will you let me know what I can do for you, please?"

Austen asked for and was given the use of the study as his headquarters, then he said:

"I understand that Mr Yalding's lawyer is expected this morning?"

"He's due in about half an hour," Adrian answered.

"Then perhaps you'd sit down, Mr. Yalding, and tell me all you can about your Uncle's death."

Adrian's brief account didn't differ at all from the one he'd given Inspector Henley; nothing new emerged. Then Austen asked some questions about the other people in the house.

Finally he said: "Can you suggest any reason at all why your uncle should have been murdered?"

"Indeed I can't. The idea seems impossible. Incidentally, Superintendent, how do you know that he was murdered?"

"What do you mean?"

"You evidently don't realise that we, his family, have been kept in the dark about that. We were told, last night, that his death wasn't due to natural causes—that was the phrase—but we haven't heard the reason for that conclusion."

"Really? Well, there's no reason why you should know. The P.M. established that he'd taken a large enough dose of a soporific to make him sleep very heavily

and that, while he was under the effect of it, a pillow was held over his face. In other words, he was suffocated."

"Good God!" Adrian exclaimed. "That sounds incredible. Is that absolutely certain?"

"Absolutely."

"But who could have done it?"

"That's what we're here to find out. You can't suggest anyone?"

"Indeed I can't. I can hardly believe that it can have happened."

"It happened all right, I'm afraid. Can't you think of anyone who could have wanted him dead?"

Adrian shook his head emphatically. "How could I? The inference from what you've told me, is that someone in the house must have done it. That's utterly and entirely impossible."

"You mean that no one had any reason?"

"Emphatically. So far as I know there's no one in the world who could want to kill him."

"He was a popular man?"

Adrian hesitated before he answered. "I wouldn't say popular. He wasn't what you'd call a genial type and popular people usually are, but to kill a man you must hate him and I can't imagine anyone's doing that—"

He broke off suddenly and was silent for a second.

"You've had an idea?" Austen asked.

"Well—a sort of half one, only it seems too far fetched to be considered seriously."

"Let's have it all the same."

Again Adrian hesitated. "Well," he said at last, "I've hardly formulated it, but—that man who was here last night—I told you about him—he'd obviously been quarrelling with my uncle—could he—only I don't see how he could—"

"That has been thought of," Austen assured him. "It

remains to be seen if it were possible that he could have hidden himself in the house before it was locked up, killed your uncle and got away unseen after the doors were opened in the morning."

"Yes," said Adrian. "That was the sort of thing I was getting at. *Could* that have happened, d'you think?"

"It could, I suppose. We shall go into it thoroughly. Except for that, you have no ideas?"

"Absolutely none."

"You were fond of your uncle?"

"Extremely. He was very good to me and we got on well together."

"What would you say of him as a man—from an outsider's point of view? You say he wasn't popular. Was he unpopular?"

Adrian shook his head. "Not in the least. The people who knew him well—his family—were devoted to him, but outsiders—well, I should say that they probably just accepted him as they found him. He wasn't easy to get to know, I should imagine and, in business, I know from what he's told me, he was a hard bargainer—a hard man, altogether, perhaps, but a just one."

"He talked about his business to you?"

"Often. He was proud of it and of the success he'd made of it. He started absolutely from nothing, you know."

"Indeed? Did he ever tell you of serious quarrels he'd had in business?"

"Not serious—disagreements, perhaps."

"Nothing, anyway, that would make anyone feel murderous towards him?"

"Nothing like that, I assure you."

"Locally, then—did he make enemies here?"

Adrian smiled at that. "Certainly not. Actually, I don't think he had very much to do with the local people."

"Well, that seems to clear that side up a bit and I won't keep you any longer just now."

As the door closed behind Adrian Yalding—Inspector Curtis remarked:

"Rather a nice young chap that, I thought."

Austen agreed. "Seems a good type. What's your opinion, Flyte? You're nearer to him in age."

"I agree with you, Sir," Flyte assured him. "Obviously fond of his uncle. There's one thing, though—Did you notice how cagey he was about his cousin's husband?"

"Benson? Yes. It's obvious that he doesn't like him but he doesn't want to put ideas into our heads."

"Strong family loyalty?" Curtis suggested.

"Could be——"

Their discussion was interrupted at that juncture by the arrival of Mr. Streetly, of Streetly and Pangbourne, Walter Yalding's solicitor.

There was no type casting about Nevil Streetly. No one could have been more unlike the accepted model of a lawyer. He was large and burly and looked as though he should have been a prosperous stockbroker, perhaps. He was also brisk and direct, which lawyers usually are not.

He greeted the detectives with a bluff heartiness, sat down in the most comfortable chair he could find, and went straight to the point.

"Well, gentlemen, I don't suppose you've got any time to waste. I certainly haven't. It's Sunday and I want my round of golf. I've been instructed to give you any information you want about my late client Walter Yalding. I understand he was murdered—shocking thing—and I took it that you'd want to know who benefited under his will. Correct?"

"Correct," Austen agreed.

"So I've brought it along. It's rather a complicated

document. Perhaps you'd rather I gave you the gist of it."

"Please," Austen said, "but a question or two, first. When was this will drawn up?"

"A fortnight ago."

"Had you made any previous ones for him?"

"Ah!" Light dawned on Mr. Streetly. "I see what you're getting at. We'll have to go back, then. Walter Yalding first came to my firm years ago, over some business contract. Then he asked us to draw up a will for him. I didn't do that myself, so don't know its provisions. Exactly three years ago he destroyed that and made another will. A fortnight ago he destroyed that and I drew up still another."

"Is it signed?"

"It is."

"Do its provisions differ much from the previous one?"

"Yes and no, Superintendent. I can see what you want and I had better particularise."

"The penultimate will was made on his daughter's marriage. It set up a trust fund for her and her mother in almost equal shares. Two weeks ago he told me that the marriage was not satisfactory and, that, in consequence of that and also of the fact that he now had a grandson, he wished to make different dispositions."

He paused and Austen asked: "Materially different?"

"Yes, in regard to his wife and daughter. There are certain bequests in both wills which remain unaltered. The principal ones are £300 to his cook and £5,000 to his nephew, Adrian."

"That's a lot," Curtis commented.

Streetly went on: "He regarded the young man with great affection—almost as his own son. Yalding told me that himself."

"Now, as regards Mrs. Yalding and Mrs. Benson, there

is a completely different arrangement. A trust is set up. There are certain charges laid on the estate, after which Mrs. Yalding is to receive the whole income from the estate for her life time, after which it is to revert to her grandson. There are several provisos in regard to the infant child's inheritance which won't, I think, interest you."

"Mrs. Benson is now, I take it, disinherited?"

"Not exactly. I will enlarge. First of all, there is a clause which is designed to prevent Guy Benson receiving any benefit whatsoever from the late Mr. Yalding's money. If either Mrs. Yalding or Mrs. Benson allows him to live with them or makes any monetary contribution to him, they forfeit everything. The trustees have it laid on them to make sure of this.

"If this condition is adhered to, Mrs. Yalding has the use of this house for so long as she wants it, provided that she maintains a home for Mrs. Benson and her child. The child's maintenance and education are to be paid for out of the estate and Mrs. Benson is to receive an allowance of £300 a year so long as she is living with her mother. If she divorces her husband this is to be increased to £1,000, which will be continued should she remarry with the approval of her mother and the trustees."

"Plain bribery," Austen commented.

"Mr. Yalding meant it to be so. He told me that he was determined that Mrs. Benson should divorce her husband."

"Whom Yalding obviously disliked intensely?"

"That is so."

"Then, Mr. Streetly," Austen asked, after a moment's thought. "Can you tell me if anyone receives a greater benefit under this will than under the previous one?"

"No one. Mrs. Benson actually loses by it and Mrs. Yalding's position remains about the same."

"Is anyone—except Adrian Yalding, of course—that is obvious—appreciably better off by Walter Yalding's death?"

"No one."

"So that, from a monetary point of view and again excepting Adrian Yalding, and possibly the cook—it was to no one's advantage to murder Yalding?"

Mr. Streetly looked grim. "Not anyone who is affected by his will. What effect his death may have on his business associates is another matter and one of which I know nothing. Now, gentlemen, if there is no more—"

"Half a moment," Austen interrupted him. "Do you know if anyone was aware of the provisions of this will?"

"Speaking quite unprofessionally, Superintendent, and without prejudice, of course, I'd bet my boots that not a soul had an idea. Yalding wasn't one to talk about his business."

"Mightn't he have told his wife what he was proposing to do?"

"Most unlikely," Mr. Streetly was emphatic. "This is off the record, of course, but he left detailed instructions to his executors which, to put it mildly, strongly suggest that he kept her pretty well in the dark about his affairs."

"I see."

"There is one thing, though," the lawyer interpolated. "Adrian Yalding might have known that he was going to get a substantial legacy. Yalding said to me something like: 'I've always told the boy I'd look after his future'."

"I see," commented Austen again. "It begins to look awkward for that young man. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing but good. Yalding thought of adopting him when he was a child and changed his mind at the last minute because Mrs. Yalding became pregnant. He paid

for the boy's education and has always been satisfied with him. He spoke of him in affectionate terms."

"You don't know anything about his financial position? Debts? Commitments?"

Streetly shook his head. "That's outside my range."

"I shall have to find out for myself, then," Austen said. "It shouldn't be difficult."

They talked for a few minutes more and then the lawyer got up to go.

"I shall have to see the family," he explained, "so I shall be here for a bit, if you should want me for anything else. I'll leave you a copy of the will, in case you'd like to read it for yourself."

Halfway through the door he turned back to face Austen again.

"It's none of my business to give you advice, Superintendent, but I don't believe I'd lay over much emphasis on that will, if I were you. It looks nasty for young Adrian, on that, but I can't see him committing a murder for money. I've seen him a good number of times, over the years, and I can't believe that of him."

"Where do you advise me to look?" Austen asked in an interested voice.

Streetly shrugged his shoulders. "That's your affair, but I'll tell you this. I've known Walter Yalding for a long time, both in and out of business—we've dined together, played golf—that sort of thing—and well, I wouldn't put it past him to have roused quite considerable enmity among men he had business dealings with."

7

“WELL, that seems to prove my point,” said William Austen, smiling provocatively at Curtis.

“Which one, Sir? ” Flyte wanted to know.

“That we shall find Walter Yalding’s murderer when we know more about his character—why he had to be killed in other words ”

“You agree with the lawyer about young Adrian, then? ” Curtis asked.

“That he wouldn’t murder for money? Yes, I think I do.”

“But why? ”

“Character again. He might murder but that wouldn’t be his motive—that’s how he struck me, at any rate.”

“You don’t mean that you rule him out, Sir? ” Flyte put in.

“Not for a minute. He may have loathed his uncle. He may have half a dozen psychological reasons for wanting the man dead——”

“But not money? ”

“Not as I see him. He may want it, need it, but I’d be very surprised if he murdered for it.” He broke off and grinned. “That’s pure theory, of course. We want facts. Let’s see what we can get. Flyte. I think I’ll talk to the servants, first. Go and send someone in, will you? ”

The cook, as befitted her superior age and domestic importance, came first. She was a Frenchwoman, who

Despite her twenty years in England, still spoke bad English with a strong accent.

She was extremely gracious to Austen when he spoke to her in her own language, and she explained to him, at length, that anyone whose heart was so deeply concerned in her work, could not be expected to know much about anything which went on outside her kitchen.

He accepted that when he had made sure that it was a statement of fact, and let her go, to be followed by Doris, whose only contribution was the tale of finding Walter Yalding dead in bed.

Elsie, the parlourmaid, had a little more to tell, but not enough. She was an unobservant woman, unfortunately. She "hadn't noticed" what Friday night's mysterious stranger looked like. She had let him in, taken his card to the drawing-room and conducted him, on instructions, to the study, and that was all she knew about him. Her only other contribution was that she had shut and fastened all the downstairs windows at dusk when she drew the curtains, and that they didn't appear to have been touched when she saw them again in the morning. Cook locked the back door before she went to bed, Elsie said, and, in any case, Mr. Yalding always saw that all the doors were locked before he went upstairs.

All three servants were asked their opinion of Walter and none of them had any decided feelings. The cook said that he was not "*sympathique*", but that she hardly ever saw him; the other two supposed that he was "all right" but it was evidently Annette who had their affections.

Elsie, who waited at table, might have overheard informative conversations, but she said that she never listened to what was being said at meals. It wasn't her business.

"That's too good to be true," Curtis commented, when she'd gone.

Austen disagreed. "She's simply the non-interested type and obviously not a gossip. I think it might be an idea if Flyte were to go along to the kitchen and scrounge some elevenses. See what you can pick up as well as tea, Flyte. Try and get at what they really think about this business."

To Curtis he said: "Let's talk to the rest of the household now, shall we?"

"Any particular order?"

"Not to start with. I don't mind who comes first. I expect we shall have to take the widow last, anyway. The lawyer is with her now, I presume, and Dr. Grange is coming to see how she is, later on. You just go and pick up the first person you can find, Curtis."

Carol came first. As she walked into the room William Austen caught his breath sharply at the sight of her. He thought he had rarely set eyes on a more enchanting young woman.

She was wearing a dress of gun-metal grey wool, very fine and moulded to her slender figure. Its darkness was a perfect foil for the gold of her hair and made her eyes seem more deeply blue. She was pale, but otherwise the tears which she had shed had not affected her. She looked very, very young and small and helpless.

She was self contained and quiet as she sat down in the chair Austen pulled out for her, facing him on the far side of her father's desk.

Before he could speak, she did so, in her high sweet voice which was almost like a child's.

She said: "They say that you have come from London because my father has been murdered. That is very silly, you know."

Austen smiled, in that friendly way of his which lit up his face and made it look so much less austere.

"For me to come from London, d'you mean?"

She shook her golden head emphatically. "No, not that. For anyone to think that he was murdered."

"You don't think that he was?"

"Of course I don't." She said it as one simply stating a perfectly self evident fact.

"Why not?"

"Well, it's so stupid. No one could possibly have murdered him."

"No? Why not?"

"Well, if you murdered anyone you'd have to hate them frightfully, wouldn't you? Nobody hated my father. They couldn't have done."

"Again why not?"

She opened big blue eyes very wide at him as if he were asking a foolish question. "He wasn't the kind of person you'd hate, you know."

He smiled at her again. "That's the trouble, Mrs. Benson. I *don't* know. I never met your father, you see. Supposing you tell me something about him."

"What he was like, you mean?"

"Please."

She folded small white hands in her lap and considered.

"Well, he was so kind, always trying to make people happy and giving them things and thinking of what they'd enjoy and that kind of thing."

"You mean that was what he was like to you?"

"Oh! not just me. Mummy and Adrian and—Grand'mère."

"His family, in fact. And they all loved him, as you do?"

"Well, Mummy does, of course, and Adrian, and Grand'mère respected him—she told me so, but not *loved* him, exactly. He wasn't her real family, you see."

"But she got on well with him?"

"Of course. Everybody did. You couldn't not, if you see what I mean."

"Your father and mother were very fond of one another?"

"They adored each other. I've never seen anything like it. When I was little I used to think all married people were like that——"

She stopped rather abruptly and the unfinished sentence hung on the air, to William Austen full of implications.

He said: "And did your husband feel as you do about your father?"

The pale cheeks flushed, quickly.

"Well, that was different," she said hastily.

"You mean that they didn't get on well?"

"No—not that, exactly, but you couldn't expect it, could you? Father didn't—approve of Guy, so you couldn't expect Guy to be awfully fond of him."

"Why didn't your father approve of him, Mrs. Benson?"

She unclasped her hands, laid one of them on the desk and leaned forward a little, confidentially.

"It was because of our marriage," she said. "You see, we ran away and father thought Guy ought not to have persuaded me to. He thought Guy had taken advantage of my being so young and it wasn't fair to me and that kind of thing."

"Do you think your father was right?"

"Well"—she hesitated—"yes, in a sort of way. I mean if I'd been older I mightn't have done it in such a hurry, but it was my fault, too. I wanted to and I'm very fond of Guy, and after all, he is my baby's father and, as Mummy says, it does take time to get used to being married. I think rather was being in a bit too much of a hurry trying to make me divorce Guy at once."

That was interesting. "Your father wanted you to get a divorce, did he? Had you any reason?"

"That's just what I said," she told him, artlessly, "but father said he'd soon find one if I'd agree to a divorce."

"He was really anxious that you should do so?"

"Yes, he was. He said I'd made a mistake and that it was silly not to admit it and start again."

"What were your husband's views about it, Mrs Benson?"

"I don't know. You see, father said don't discuss it with Guy till I'd made up my mind."

"But you'd spoken to your mother about it?"

A lovely little smile lit up her face. "I mostly tell Mummy things. She's a darling. She always understands."

"You're a lucky person to have a mother like that."

"I know I am. She said don't rush. You've taken on something, willingly; try to make a go of it. And she said it would be wrong to take Terry—my baby—away from his father."

"Do you agree with her?"

Carol looked doubtful. "Well, I do, and I don't. You see, father was so sure about it and he was an awfully difficult person to disagree with. He always made you feel that he was right and that you *must* do what he wanted you to, and I don't think Mummy was right about Terry. You see, Guy isn't really fond of him; he never wants to do anything for him or talk about him or make plans. I said that, and Grand'mère said that young fathers are often like that about babies and they get interested in them when they're older. Grand'mère's very wise, you know, but she *has* got this religious thing and father said it warps her judgment."

Austen was getting more and more absorbed in this conversation—it wasn't an interrogation. This artless child was telling him freely more about her family than

any amount of stringent police questioning would have elicited.

It was his friendly, interested attitude which did it. It so often had just that effect and confidences were apt to be poured out on him, sometimes very much to the subsequent regret of the pourers.

"What religious thing?" he asked, gently.

"She's a Catholic, you see, and she says that divorce is mortal sin. She's quite rabid about it. Mummy thinks it's wrong too, but not wicked, the way Grand'mère does."

"And you don't agree with either of them?"

She shook her beautiful head. "I think it's a pity to break things up, but if you can't make a go of it, you'd better make a fresh start."

"And do you intend to?"

"I don't know—now. Father would have made me, in the end, because he was sure that it was best for me and Terry, but now—everything's going to be different without him."

She broke off, swallowed hard, and looked up at William Austen.

"You sort of seem to understand things," she said at last. "It's funny. I've never met you before and I feel as if I could tell you anything. You're not a bit like my idea of a detective."

He laughed. "Where do you get your ideas from? Detective stories?"

"No, I never read them. Grand'mère does. *Romans Policiers* she calls them and she simply adores them. She likes the English ones best."

"So do I." Austen agreed. "There's nothing to touch them."

He got up from his chair. "I think I don't need to keep you any longer, Mrs. Benson. I wonder if you'd be good enough to send your husband along to see me?"

When she'd gone, Curtis looked up from his notes.

"D'you think anyone can possibly be as innocent as she appears to be?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know," said Austen. "Did you think she was too good to be true?"

"I did, rather, though it seemed genuine enough."

"I'm inclined to feel that it is. Retarded development is the reason, in that case. Due to over firm attachment to father's apron-strings. I'm inclined to be sorry for her husband. Father-in-law wouldn't appear to have made his married life any easier."

"No," Curtis said, gravely. "Things don't look too good for that young man, do they?"

Guy Benson arrived for his interview looking sulky. He slouched into the room, sat down as he was told and said: "What's this in aid of? I've already told some policemen all I know about this business."

"This is just a routine corroboration," Austen assured him. "I shan't keep you long, but I hope you'll be able to help me."

"I don't see how."

"Well, for instance, have you, personally, any views as to who could have murdered Mr. Yalding?"

Guy said, with real temper in his voice: "Pretty well anyone he disagreed with, I should think."

"Not an easy man to get on with, you mean?"

"I'll say not."

"Were you on bad terms with him, yourself? I mean, did you, personally, find him difficult to get on with?"

Benson gave a sigh which sounded like one of relief and completely dropped his sulky attitude. He gave Austen the impression, now, that he wanted to talk; that he was glad of an opportunity to confide in someone.

He said: "I just couldn't get on with him at all, from

the word go. He took a dislike to me from the start and never got over it. He didn't want me to marry his daughter and that was that. Mind you, he'd have felt the same about anyone who married her—he didn't want her to marry, if you ask me. He'd got her under his thumb and he wanted to keep her there—well, anyway, he got her back there, in the end, all right."

"Did you ever actually quarrel with him?" Austen wanted to know and wondered if he'd be answered.

He was, rather to his surprise.

"Never. We weren't matey, and we weren't likely to be, but we managed a surface politeness. How long we'd have kept it up, if he'd lived, is another matter. My patience was being worn pretty thin."

"What about particularly?"

"My marriage. He'd made up his mind to break it up."

"How could he do that?"

"You'd be surprised what he could do, Superintendent, when he gave his mind to it. He just quietly worked away at Carol, making her dissatisfied with me."

"What had he against you, Mr Benson?"

"He never told me, but I know. I haven't any money and I haven't a title. He thought Carol should have had a man with both. He was working her up to divorce me."

"With cause?"

"Absolutely not. But he—well, this is in confidence—he tried to bribe me to give her one."

"That was going pretty far."

"I'll say it was. A thousand pounds he offered me if I'd provide evidence. Most business-like, I assure you. Five hundred pounds when he had the evidence and five hundred pounds when the divorce was through."

"But how did he know his daughter would agree?"

Guy laughed bitterly. "Didn't I tell you he'd got Carol where he wanted her? She had an obsession for him. She

thought he was wonderful—still does. She's pretty fed up with me at this minute because I'm not crying my eyes out that he's dead."

"What did she think of her father's offer to you?"

"She doesn't know about it."

"You haven't told her?"

Benson shook his head.

"Why not? Surely it would have been the natural thing to do?"

"There really wasn't time."

"Oh! Look here, when did this conversation with Yalding take place?"

"On Friday night." Benson rushed into an explanation. "It was before dinner and I was so livid with rage that I rushed out directly dinner was over and went out."

"To the Dog and Duck," Austen amended.

"How on earth did you know that?"

The detective laughed. "We have our spies! What made you do that?"

"I couldn't stand the house. I got nearly sozzled and when I got back here Carol was in bed and asleep, and even in the state I was in, I didn't feel that it would be a wise move to wake her up and tell her that her father was a stinking so and so. In the morning he was dead, and, so to speak, the question didn't arise."

"You say you were livid with rage. I thought that you previously stated that there was no quarrel?"

"It's supposed to take two to make one," Benson said.

"Meaning?"

"He did the talking. I let him get on with it. I simply had to. If I'd let myself go for a second I'd have wipped and given him what he was asking for."

"Look, Benson," Austen said, reasonably, "Yalding must have said more than you've told me to get you into that state. Let's have the whole story."

" Well, he started by saying that he knew I'd married Carol for the money I'd hoped she'd have. I merely told him that was a lie. It was. I'd have married her if she'd never had a penny. Well, you've seen her—wouldn't you? "

Austen chuckled but didn't answer.

Benson went on.

" Then he made his precious offer: £1,000 for a divorce. I said nothing doing. So he said that I needn't think I'd do myself any good by sticking to Carol. He'd see that I never got a penny of his money while he was alive and he'd make a will which would make sure that I didn't after his death, either. Then he said that the only way I'd benefit from having married Carol was by letting her get rid of me. Nothing if I didn't let her divorce me and £1,000 if I did. Take it or leave it. So I told him that I wouldn't do it for £20,000 and he could go to hell. After that, I walked out."

" That the whole story? "

Benson nodded.

" Well, thanks " said Austen " You've provided me with a big ray of light on your father-in-law's character and I wanted it. I wanted to find reasons why anyone should kill him. You've given me them."

" I didn't do it," Benson cried, in some alarm. " I swear I didn't. If he'd been a younger man I'd probably have knocked him down then and there, but——"

" Calm down," Austen said, quietly. " I wasn't accusing you. I meant that you've shown me that he was the type of man who could easily make anyone feel murderous. But who did? Any suggestions? "

Guy's alarm subsided and he tried to be co-operative.

" No one in this house did it " he stated with finality. " My wife half worshipped him, my mother-in-law was the most devoted wife——"

"The servants?"

Guy shook his head. "Not a hope."

"Adrian Yalding."

"No. He was fond of his uncle. You could see that."

"Mrs. Lestrangle, then?"

Guy laughed. "You can rule her out. She's the most conventional woman I've ever met. I know. I've heard her. You can't do this; it isn't done. You mustn't do that; it's not correct. I'm sure she wouldn't think murder was correct."

"I don't think it is, either," Austen agreed, laughing.

"Where shall I look for my murderer, then?"

"I'd start with the people he did business with. From what I've heard, I should say he was a tough nut. If he wanted something he went all out to get it and no holds barred. There must be quite a few people who've been done down by him and haven't liked him any the better for it."

After a few more questions Benson was allowed to go.

"Well?" Austen queried when the door had closed.

"I didn't take a fancy to the chap," Curtis said. "But if his story's true, he's fairly clear."

"Why?"

"Well, Yalding was more good to him alive than dead."

"Expound, old man."

Curtis sat back comfortably in his chair and began to talk.

"If, as I say, Yalding told Benson that he'd tied up his money so that Benson couldn't lay hands on it through his wife, he was more use to Benson alive."

"By holding on he might get better terms, you mean?"

Curtis nodded. "Yes, he could put the price of divorce up, perhaps, or he might have thought that he could work something through his wife."

"What sort of something?"

"Well—Yalding is said to have idolised the girl. Benson could have thought that he could influence her to persuade her father to make him an allowance—you can see the sort of thing I'm getting at?"

"I can and I'm inclined to agree that Benson doesn't appear to have much motive except dislike for Yalding. Some parts of his story, at any rate, ring true—what he reports Yalding as saying about his will. On the face of it, if Yalding persuaded him that he wouldn't benefit by his death—and we now know that he won't—he'd simply have no motive for murder."

"Except," Curtis interrupted. "As you just pointed out, dislike."

"And I don't think that would be a strong enough motive for a chap like Benson"

"Supposing he put Yalding out so's he couldn't break up his marriage?"

"There, again, not strong enough. I can't feel that Benson would murder for either love or loathing"

"Only for money?"

"That's how I see him"

"You didn't care for him either?"

"Not to be noticeable, Curtis"

Flyte came into the room with the air of one who has tidings.

"Nice cup of tea?" Austen wanted to know.

He shook his head sadly. "It was cocoa!" he protested. "Who ever invented that nauseating drink. I'd like to know. I think I ought to get danger money. I had to swallow two cups of the stuff to get what you wanted, sir. Still, 'It was my duty and I did' The dauntless young officer whose devotion to——"

"Shut up," Curtis laughed. "What have you got—besides cocoa?"

"A nice bit of gossip—or news depending on how you look at it. There was one hell of a row in this room on Friday evening. 'Rude words passed' as my new friend Doris—or is it Elsie?—told me."

"Between whom?" Austen demanded.

"The late Yalding and his son-in-law, Guy Benson."

"Well, go on."

"Don't rush me, sir, please. It was before dinner and Elsie, or it might be Doris—there are two Waters in the kitchen only they're not sisters and their name isn't Waters. One of them's the parlourmaid and the other the housemaid. Anyway, the parlourmaid one was in the dining-room laying the table and she heard voices, 'raised in anger,' she said, through that door, over there,"—he pointed—"which leads into the dining-room, which happened, more by good luck than good management, to be open about half an inch. Yalding and Benson were at it, hammer and tongs, though Elsie—or Doris—couldn't hear what it was about. It's my belief that she didn't really try," Flyte added, disgustedly.

"But she's sure there was a quarrel?"

"She'll swear to that. 'The two gentlemen were calling each other names.' She heard that much. Occasionally they shouted and there were loud noises which she thought were Mr. Yalding thumping the table, apparently a habit of his when 'put out.' Then, suddenly Benson barged through this communicating door shouting: 'I could murder you for this if you weren't Carol's father. But you'll get what's coming to you one of these days'. Then he slammed the door behind him, and, completely ignoring Doris—or it may have been Elsie—made a bee-line for the cupboard where the drinks are kept, seized a glass from the table and poured himself out one of the stiffest whiskys she has ever seen. He put it down in once and rushed out of the room, muttering something to him-

self which she didn't catch. But she could tell he was angry. 'Oo, he looked awful', she said. 'His eyes were fair blazing'."

"End of Saga?" Austen asked when the Sergeant paused.

"Finis. Amen. Except for the fact that he sat 'glowering' all through dinner, and rushed out of the house directly afterwards, 'not even waiting for his coffee'."

Austen looked at Curtis. Curtis looked at Austen.

Austen smiled. "It takes two to make a quarrel," he quoted from Benson. "And he said he sat there saying nothing and letting Yalding insult him!"

Curtis looked thoughtful. "Why did he admit that he was angry and deny the quarrel?"

"Could there be more in this than meets the eye?"

"I'd say there could," Curtis answered. He was silent for a few seconds, then, having turned things over in his mind, with the quiet deliberation which was one of his assets—a complement to his Chief's impulsiveness—he spoke.

"It could have been something like this. There was a real quarrel between Yalding and Benson on Friday, and Benson knowing that will look bad for him, gets in first. That is, he admits there was a scene but says that he was a passive participant. He sat quiet while Yalding shouted. He argues that if he gets his version in first, we shall take it."

"Half a minute," Flyte put in, plaintively. "What is all this about?" You two have been having fun while I was being a martyr to Cocoa—the Cup that Cheers, but not Inebriates."

"Stop fooling, Flyte," Curtis ordered and pushed his note book across to the Sergeant. "Read this, if you can, and you'll know all about it."

Flyte struggled with the Inspector's private shorthand-

cum-telegraphese, but, as he'd encountered it before, he managed to get the gist of it.

Very 'interesting," he said, handing the book back. "The servants say that Yalding treated Benson 'like dirt', which being interpreted means that he hardly spoke to him at all, and if Benson spoke to Yalding, he got a short answer or none at all."

"That bears out Benson's story," Austen commented. "I think we'll invite opinions from everyone. Flyte, would you go—at your most engagingly formal, if you please—present my compliments to Mrs. Lestrangle and ask her if she would be so kind as to grant me an interview? I fancy that approach will pay best."

Flyte tracked Mrs. Lestrangle down in the nursery, where she and Carol were playing with the baby.

He delivered his message, but, before the other woman could say anything, Carol broke in.

"Oh! You'll like talking to him, Grand'mère, that head policeman. He's a perfect poppet."

Flyte suppressed a grin, and kept the epithet for future use.

Mrs. Lestrangle said, a little chillingly, but with the hovering ghost of a smile: "One does not describe policemen as poppets, I think, my child."

"Oh! But this one is. You'd never know he was a policeman. Truly, Grand'mère, he's charming—*très convenable et très bien élevé*—very correct and well brought up."

Mrs. Lestrangle gave a slight shrug of her shoulders and permitted Flyte to escort her to her rendezvous.

William Austen got up from his chair as she came into the study. "Made an entrance" would probably be the better way to put it, Austen thought, noting instantly her

dignity, her grace and her faint air of bestowing a favour, as she stood for a second in the doorway. She was wearing black, with pearls, they became her and she knew it.

For her part she looked Austen unobtrusively up and down, appreciating his very well cut suit, his hand-made shoes, his air of poise and breeding, and his delightful voice and smile as he thanked her for coming, and invited her to sit down.

"I have asked you to see me, Madame," he began, "because I hope that you can help me. You, I believe, as a member of the family, but not a regular inmate of the house, may be able to provide me with the sidelights on the *ménage*—the household—which may lead me to discover your son-in-law's murderer."

She approved of that approach, and smiled, graciously.

"I shall have the greatest pleasure in giving you any assistance in my power. It is, then, absolutely certain that he was murdered?"

"Absolutely."

"And you believe that it was done by someone within the household?"

"I can't be positive as yet, Madame, but all the indications point that way"

"In that case, you have not far to look. Murder is not committed without a strong motive. The only person in this *ménage* who had such a reason, is my unfortunate grand-daughter's husband. Guy Benson."

8

HER statement was made calmly, almost casually, without emphasis, without drama.

Austen caught his breath sharply. "That is your belief?"

"It is a fact. I have thought—but naturally—considerably on this question, since we were told that murder had been done. I came to the conclusion that either it had been done by someone who is a stranger to us from, as one says, the outside, or by Guy Benson. One would much prefer, naturally, that a stranger should be blamed, but if that is not possible, there is only one logical answer, which I have given you."

"Would you," he asked, "give me your reasons for coming to that conclusion?"

"To one who knows all the people concerned, they are evident. I will explain.

"My late son-in-law was kindness itself to the members of his immediate family. My daughter, my grand-daughter and the young nephew, Adrian, are all devoted to him. His death is a terrible blow to them, an irreplaceable loss. They gain nothing by it. Why, therefore, should they wish to kill him?"

"There remains, then, only Guy Benson—and myself. I am entirely without motive and—I do not act motivelessly."

"One moment, Mrs. Lestrangle," Austen put in, as she paused. "Do you mind telling me—what were your reactions to your son-in-law?"

She bowed her elegant head. "No, your question is quite correct. I—shall we say—admired him, in a way. I admired his business acumen; the way he had got on in the world. I appreciated, very greatly, the good life and the establishment he had given my daughter and his devotion to her and their child. For the rest—emotionally, as one says—he and I were on the best of terms, but that was all on the surface. We had nothing to say to one another, no interests in common beyond my daughter and my grand-daughter. There, we were united in wishing the best of everything for them, always. I, I assure you, would have no motive for depriving them of a loving husband and father."

"So," Austen said, slowly and deliberately, "by a process of elimination, you arrive at Guy Benson."

She bowed

"But you must have other reasons?"

"I have"

"Would you give me them?"

She looked at him, very directly. "First," she said, "will you assure me that there is no question whatever but that this was murder?"

"There is no question whatever. I give you my word for that."

"How can you be so sure?"

He smiled. Her directness both amused and pleased him.

"The medical evidence makes it a certainty, Madame. Mr. Yalding was suffocated—smothered in his sleep. A pillow or something like that, was held over his face until he died. Down and fluff were found in his lungs. When he was found, dead, his head was resting on the only two pillows on the bed, which were made of foam rubber. An accident was therefore impossible. No man can suffocate himself and then remove the pillow with which he did it."

and lie down and die. Therefore he didn't commit suicide. Therefore he was murdered. Have I satisfied you? "

She assented. " Now shall I tell you why Guy Benson was the only person in this house who would wish my son-in-law dead. To do that, I must tell you a little of the family history. One would not wish, naturally, to discuss one's family with a stranger. One would not do so in ordinary circumstances; it would be, in bad taste. But murder—well, that is not an ordinary circumstance. In its presence *les convenances* cease to operate. Is that not so? "

" It is, indeed," he confirmed. " I do appreciate your attitude, Madame."

" I had thought that you would. Even so, one does not wish a scandal in one's family, but I have understood that an undetected murderer kills again and one would not wish that such a one should be enabled to do so. One might, even, oneself, be the next victim."

She smiled at him brilliantly, and he heard her draw a little quick breath as if of determination, before she went on.

" My grand-daughter made a *mésalliance*. She ran away to marry this Benson, of whom her parents did not approve. Eventually they came to live here and my son-in-law became certain that the marriage was a mistake and must be ended."

" Did Mrs. Yalding agree? " Austen put in.

" My daughter is very tolerant," she told him. " She is also patient. She hoped that things might improve. Her husband was not either tolerant nor patient. He wished to put an end to the marriage immediately. Also, he was not willing that this Benson should live here any longer."

" Any particular reason why not? "

She shrugged her shoulders expressively, like the Frenchwoman she so evidently was.

"I will be frank with you," she conceded. "The young man is impossible. He has no breeding—you have doubtless seen for yourself—he is idle, he has no money and does not try to earn any—in short, he is a parasite and my son-in-law decided that he would no longer tolerate him.

"It was on Friday that he came finally to this decision, it seems. He said to my daughter and to me that he intended, that very evening, to give Benson his *congé*. He would tell him that he must leave this house in a week. He would also, he said, tell Benson that my—granddaughter wished to divorce him and he would offer him money if he produced the evidence which would enable her to do so. There, you see, you have the reason why this Benson would prefer him dead."

"I don't think I do quite see," Austen objected. "Surely he would prefer his father-in-law alive so that he could collect this money from him?"

"Aha!" she cried in accents of triumph. "You are clever, Mr.—? I regret I do not know your name——"

He supplied it.

"Yes, you are clever, Mr. Austen, but you have not yet seen into the mind of this criminal."

"And you have, Madame?"

"I believe so." She had no false modesty. She was becoming more Gallic in her manner with every sentence, as she got more involved with her subject. Austen was prepared for her to burst into French at any moment now.

"This, you see, is how that one reasoned," she went on. "If my son-in-law were dead, this Benson would have far more money than he had been offered and he would keep his wife and his comfortable home as well. Thus: this house, after her husband's death, will belong to my daughter. Her daughter Carol, will continue to live here with her mother, who is far too kind to turn out her daughter's husband. Also, there will be money. Natur-

ally, I do not know in what proportions it will be, but it speaks for itself that the money will have been left to my daughter and grand-daughter. Therefore, if there is no divorce this Benson will share his wife's money. There! Do you not see how simple it is? How advantageous to one person only, is my son-in-law's death? "

"On that reasoning I certainly do," Austen agreed. He thought for a second, then he asked: "Where does Mrs. Benson come in all this? Did she want to divorce her husband? "

Mrs. Lestrangle smiled, a little wryly. "She is a charming child, Mr. Austen, as you have seen, but a child. She does not know if she wants a divorce or not. Certainly, she would never have thought of such a thing but for her father, but, if he had lived, he would have persuaded her that she *did* want it. That goes without saying. He had more influence over her than anyone—too much. It was not healthy."

"What did you and Mrs. Yalding feel about it? "

"The divorce? Ah! you see, I am a Catholic. Naturally I should oppose it. Also, my daughter is not a Catholic, but she believes in the sanctity of marriage. But that would make no difference to Carol, I fear. She has no religion—her father took its place. She would do as he wished."

"That is a very interesting situation. You have clarified several things for me, Mrs. Lestrangle. Will you add to your kindness? Tell me your opinion of Adrian Yalding? "

She answered at once, without hesitation. "An excellent young man. I have known him since childhood. He was as one of the family, loved by them and devoted to them all."

"He had no grievance against Mr. Yalding? "

"Grievance? But why? "

"Because I have been told, Mr. Yalding was going to adopt him and then changed his mind."

"That was because Carol was born, of course. No, I assure you, there could have been no grievance in regard to that. My son-in-law paid for Adrian's education as though he had been his own son."

"Then he would have no motive for murder?"

She was horrified. "But no! No! None in the world."

Austen got up from his chair: the interview was over.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lestrangle," he said. "You have been of the greatest help. Do you think that Mrs. Yalding would be able to give me a few minutes, now? I don't like to bother her, naturally, but it is my duty to talk to every member of the family."

She looked grave. "Must you?" she asked, anxiously.

"Reluctantly, I must. I can wait until later, of course, but will that make it any better? I'll trouble her as little as I possibly can."

"I feel sure of that," she assured him graciously. "She is far from well, my poor daughter. Not only is she grieving for a loved husband; she has had a terrible shock. It was so sudden, so unprepared for—and so dreadful, his death. I will see how she appears, and if you can see her, you shall. Then it will be over—behind her—and perhaps she can rest a little."

A few minutes after Mrs. Lestrangle had left the study Carol came running into it.

"You are a marvel!" she cried, to Austen. "You've captivated Grand'mère, she's singing your praises. She says—in French, of course; we always speak French with her, she insists—that you have charm, that you are sympathetic, intelligent and all that there is of the most correct."

"And she," he laughed and spoke in French himself, with an admirable accent, "is all that there is of the most flattering."

She laughed, too. "That will complete your conquest," she told him. "But, seriously, I've been sent to say that Mummy will see you, now, upstairs in her sitting-room, but you've not to stay long. She's up, but Dr. Grange says she's to go back to bed with a sedative as soon as she's had her lunch. I don't believe she slept at all last night, poor darling."

He found Annette Yalding deep in a big armchair by the fire, in a small room full of flowers. He saw, at once, what a pretty woman she must be normally, though now there were deep shadows under her fine eyes and she looked utterly weary.

He came over to her side and said a few words of sympathy, then of apology. She accepted both with politeness and a kind of exhausted apathy.

She said in a low, gentle voice: "My mother says that you want to question me about—about my husband's death. There is nothing more that I can tell you than I told Inspector Henley yesterday."

"I'm not going to ask you any of those things again," he assured her. "I have the Inspector's notes of the facts so far as they are known. You can help me in quite a different way, Mrs. Yalding, if you will. Give me surmises—guesses."

She looked surprised. "Do sit down. What exactly do you mean?"

"I want your own opinion. Who do you think could have wanted your husband's death?"

"I have not the faintest idea, Mr. Austen—nor do I care very much who killed him. He is dead and can't be brought to life again. To me, nothing else matters."

"You don't want his murder to be avenged? His murderer punished?"

She shook her head wearily. "It simply doesn't matter. That won't bring him back."

"But if there is a murderer at large, he may kill again—you—your daughter."

"But why?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "They do you know. Through fear, sometimes. They have to get rid of someone they think may betray them."

She said, quietly. "I am not afraid of that. None of us knows anything."

"You might know something without knowing that you do. However, let's leave that. Had your husband any—enemies? I know that sounds an almost melodramatic term, but what I mean by it is, really, people who wished him ill."

She shook her head.

"Not in his business?" he pursued

"I shouldn't know about them if there were any. He hardly ever spoke of his business affairs to me."

Then he saw her pause and hesitate

"Wait," she said. "I suppose you've heard about this man who came to see my husband on Friday night and then disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think he was an 'enemy' to use your term. At any rate, my husband was worried about him."

"You know that?"

"He told me so. He came to say goodnight to me on Friday and he sat down and we talked for a time. I think I should explain, perhaps, that my doctor insists on my going to bed early. My husband stays up very late as a rule, so we have separate rooms so he doesn't disturb me. When we had people staying with us he always came to

my room before I went to sleep, so that we could be alone together and talk if we wanted to—you know—discuss the day's doings, make plans and that kind of thing.

"On Friday night I thought he looked—well—troubled about something, so I asked him what it was, and he said that he didn't like this man's vanishing before they'd finished their talk.

"I asked him if it mattered much, or something like that, and he told me that this man had a grudge against him. I asked him what it was, but he put me off and wouldn't discuss it."

"That is interesting," Austen said. "Your husband said nothing else at all about this man?"

"Nothing. The rest of the time we were talking about quite other things."

"And then, you told Inspector Henley, Mr. Yalding came back to your room, later on, to ask for sleeping tablets."

"Yes. Somewhere after midnight that was."

"Did he say what had been keeping him from sleeping? Was it worrying about this man, do you think?"

"He didn't say so. We really didn't talk at all then. I was more than half asleep and I was trying not to wake up completely. I don't sleep very well and I find it so difficult to get off again once I'm really disturbed."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"Absolutely."

"You've no other ideas as to who could have killed your husband?"

She looked, if it were possible, even more unhappy.

"No," she said in a weary voice. "Superintendent, I've been trying *not* to think, ever since it—happened."

He pounced on that. "Because you know who it might be and would rather not admit it even to yourself?"

"Oh no!" she said, on a sigh. "Because I don't want

to think of anything. Soon I shall have to take up my life again—alone. All I want to do now is to prepare myself for that."

She raised a very slender, very white hand and put it across her eyes for a second.

"I'm sorry," she murmured then. "I must not give way to self pity. I'm much luckier than many——" she had to make an effort to say the word, "widows! I'm not really all alone. I have my daughter and her little boy."

"What about your daughter's husband? Could you be frank and tell me how you feel about him?"

"Guy? Well, I expect you'll hear somehow or other, if I don't tell you. We—my husband and I—didn't feel he was the husband we'd have chosen for her. I expect most parents feel that, to begin with, at any rate. Then, I suppose, one becomes reconciled, unless there's anything really wrong."

"Is there that, in this case?"

"No. It's just that he—isn't what we'd hoped for. I can't get fond of him, as I'd like to, but I don't dislike him."

"Mr. Yalding did, though?"

She looked surprised and rather displeased. "So you have heard that? This is very unpleasant, Superintendent, to feel that one has no—privacy."

"I'm sorry. I realise it, but you can see that I can't help it. A murder has been done and I must find out everything I can which might have any bearing on it. Believe me, it's distasteful to me, personally, to have to pry. As a policeman, I have to."

"I'm not blaming you," she sounded wearily resigned.

"Will you confirm it, then? Your husband disliked Guy Benson?"

"Yes."

"And he wanted to break up the marriage?"

" Yes."

" And you? "

" I was against that. don't believe in divorce."

" One more question and we'll leave the subject. Will your daughter divorce her husband—now? "

A certain amount of animation, almost amounting to indignation, came into her voice.

" Superintendent, you have been very kind, very considerate, so far, but I cannot see what my daughter's marriage has to do with my husband's death, which is what you are enquiring into, isn't it? "

" I'm sorry," he told her again. " It mayn't seem to you to have any bearing on my enquiry, but from my point of view it might."

" I must accept that, I suppose. In any case, it doesn't matter, one way or the other. I'll answer you, so far as I can. I don't really know what my daughter will do. Her father was urging a divorce. Without his influence she may decide against it. That is all I can say."

Elsie—it was Elsie—came in at that moment with a tray.

" Your lunch, Madam," she announced, arranging it on a table by Annette's chair. " And Mrs. Lestrangle asked me to say that she does hope you'll try to eat it all."

The sight of the delicious looking food made Austen feel hungry and reminded him that he could do with something to eat.

So, having, he believed, come to the end of what he could usefully do here and now, he thanked Annette for her help and patience, and took himself off, collected Curtis and Flyte and, as they drove to the village, gave them a résumé of what she had said.

When lunch at the Dog and Duck was over—it was a very good one, and being Sunday in an English village,

very substantial, the three detectives went upstairs to their sitting-room and pulled up their chairs around the fire.

Surprisingly good coffee was sent up to them, and with the landlord's compliments, some even better and more surprising brandy.

"Well, that ought to help us," Austen said, when he tasted it. "We're in luck, here. The English inn as it should be and rarely is, nowadays. So let's get to work."

"This morning we've dealt with the personal side of this affair. We ought to be able to assess the late Walter Yalding now, as he appeared to his family. Does it, as we see it, provide any of them with a motive? We accept, at present, that they all had equal means and opportunity to kill him. So, gentlemen, who's your fancy?"

"Benson," both the others chorused. "Who's yours?"

Austen was thoughtful. "It's fifty-fifty on him, I think. If he's telling the truth, his father-in-law might have been more use to him alive. On the other hand, is he telling the truth? I'm inclined to doubt it. He certainly gave me the impression that he had something to hide. I don't care for him, personally, so I've got to be all the more careful in my approach. All I'll say is that he looks highly deserving of suspicion. But we mustn't forget Adrian Yalding's legacy. If he proves to have been hard up or anything like that, it gives him a very pretty motive. Unfortunately, we've got to wait until tomorrow before that side of his background can be investigated. The same applies to the Mysterious Stranger. What a blight Sundays can be for us."

"I thought you'd put the M.S. into the red herring class, sir," Flyte objected.

"You're right, I did, Flyte. I admit it, but I'm beginning to think I was too sweeping. Neither so red nor so smelly as I thought at first."

Curtis asked. "What made you change your mind?"

"Mrs. Yalding's evidence. She said that Yalding told her that he couldn't sleep on Friday night because he was worrying over 'that evening's business interview' or words to that effect. Well, everyone seems agreed that Yalding's habit was never to bring his business into his home life. This time it was brought into it by someone else and it worried him. So it must have been important, one supposes. Therefore, this M.S., as Flyte calls him, assumes greater significance."

"Yes, I see that," Curtis agreed. "So, as we can't find out any more about him until Yalding's office opens tomorrow, what do we do next?"

Austen appreciatively finished his brandy and began filling his pipe.

"I think we've got a dull sort of afternoon in front of us," he said. "We've done our psychological stuff and now the factual part of the job has to be tackled. Everyone at Lawn Lodge must be questioned as to whether they heard any noises in the night, any sounds which might have meant that someone was going into Yalding's room. I want a time-table of everyone's movements—what time they went to bed, if they got up in the night and, if so, when; can anyone produce a proof—a witness—that they were never outside their own bedrooms—all that kind of thing."

"Then there's the M.S.," Flyte put in.

"Yes. I'll take that on, my lad. Was he seen? Was his car, if any, seen or heard? It's not likely that I'll get anything, but one never knows."

"And what about the pillows?" Curtis asked.

"Good Lord!" Austen exclaimed in disgust. "Good job you reminded me. I'd completely overlooked that. I'm afraid it'll be a thankless job, but it will have to be done."

"What are you getting at, Inspector?" Flyte wanted to know.

Curtis explained. "Yalding had foam rubber pillows on his bed—a fad of his apparently. He was suffocated by a down pillow—or something containing down—*pure* down, mind you, not feathers. There's a lot of difference."

"Oh! I see. We've got to try to track down the one which did the job, find out where it came from? Who could get hold of it?"

"That's the idea."

"Why do you say it will be a thankless job, sir?" Myte asked Austen.

"Because it's pretty easy betting that, in a house of that kind, most of the pillows will be down, probably lots of the cushions too, and they're likely to have been bought at the same time, from the same place."

"So they'll all be twins, as it were?"

"That's the idea."

Austen got up, stretched and sighed. "Well, we'd better get to it. I could have spent a pleasant afternoon in front of this fire, if I'd been allowed!"

Carol Benson was sitting by the window in her large, warm, comfortably furnished bedroom, with a towel across her knees, removing, on her Grandmother's instructions, the bright red varnish on her finger nails, in preparation for substituting a pale pink one. A small table beside her held a collection of small bottles and manicure tools, and she was giving half her attention to them and half to looking out of the window.

A large lawn stretched out before her, white and even with snow, unmarked save by the feet of the birds who came near to the house to be fed in the cold weather.

Something had raised her spirits a little. She neither looked nor felt so unhappy as she had done earlier in the day. She didn't quite know why; perhaps it was that she had now accepted the fact that her father was dead,

instead of fighting against it. In any case, she wasn't given much to introspection and was content to be thankful that she could think about him without wanting to cry.

The door of the room was opened and Guy came in.

"Hello, darling!" he greeted her. "Feeling better?"

She put down her nail file and looked up at him as he came close to her.

"Yes," she answered, slowly. "I think perhaps I am."

"That's good. I hated seeing you looking so miserable."

She picked up an emery board and got to work with it. "No one would have thought you even noticed, let alone cared," she remarked, with an edge to her soft voice.

He sat down on the arm of her chair and put his arm around her shoulders. "Of course I care. I felt rotten that I couldn't do anything to comfort you."

She shrugged the arm off. "I hadn't noticed that you'd tried particularly hard."

"Oh! Come, darling," his voice was coaxing. "Don't let's quarrel. I admit I'm not broken-hearted about your father, but you could hardly expect me to be, could you? He'd no use for me and he didn't try to hide it."

"Well, d'you blame him!" she cried, indignantly, violently unscrewing the top of a varnish bottle. "Really, Guy, you couldn't expect him to admire the way you behave, sitting about doing nothing from morning till night, and grumbling all the time."

"He didn't help me to do anything, did he? I asked him if he couldn't put me in the way of a job and he wouldn't do a thing."

"Because he didn't feel he could. You know he found you one chance and you turned it down."

"Oh *that*!" He shrugged, disdainfully. "Well, what do you think? A wretched little nine to six clerk's job for money that would just about keep me in cigarettes."

"You preferred to cadge your cigarettes from me?"

She was varnishing her nails now, and very badly too, for her hand was shaking. Like most normally peaceable people, when she *did* lose her temper, it upset her badly. Usually she ignored Guy when he was difficult—as he often was—or returned the sort answer. Today, she felt that her patience was exhausted.

"Darling, don't let's quarrel," he said, again. "I admit I haven't been easy to get on with lately, but things have been difficult, you'll admit. I won't say anything against your father, but it hasn't been easy to keep quiet when I knew he was trying to turn you against me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh! You know he was always running me down and pointing out my faults to you——"

"There hasn't been much need for anyone to do that," she retorted. "I know perfectly well how lazy and bad tempered and rude you are."

"Oh! Leave it. What I mean is, sweetheart, that, frankly, without your father trying all the time to separate us, things will be easier. Let's start again and not quarrel. We were happy enough in Persia, weren't we?"

"That was different, Guy. You had a job and we had a house of our own and you behaved quite differently."

"I should again. I'm sure, if we had a house of our own. Well, we shall be able to now, and I'll get a job——"

"Who's going to pay for the house?" she asked pertinently.

He tried to put his arm around her again, but she wouldn't let him.

"You're shaking my hand," she protested.

He laid his hand on her knee. "Look, my sweet, you're going to be a wealthy young woman, now. We shall easily be able to afford a house."

"How am I going to be wealthy?"

"Well——" he was a little embarrassed, but not much. "Your father's sure to have left you a lot of money——"

She put the brush back into the varnish bottle with a little plop and sat quite still and silent for a moment.

"Oh!" she said, at last. "Oh! I see what you mean."

"So let's start all over again, darling," Guy rushed on. And be happy the way we used to be. Kiss me, my sweet, and make it up."

She got up abruptly, pushed him away and stood looking at him for a second.

"Come along," he coaxed. "Let's kiss and be friends."

She said: "No. No. Guy, I don't think so. Now get out of my way, please. I'm going to Terry."

"Oh, don't do that, not just yet. Stay and talk a little——"

She ignored him, completely, pushed past him and walked out of the room.

William Austen had a few firm rules about his work which he never broke if he could avoid it. One was never to talk shop at meals, another that the results of routine investigations should be sorted and assimilated, mentally, before they were reported. His theory was that they would fall into perspective better if they were allowed to lie fallow for a time.

Consequently, when he met Curtis and Flyte at the Dog and Duck at opening time, which was seven o'clock, it being a Sunday, they knew that he wouldn't, then, want to hear anything about their afternoon's work unless it were very urgent.

Being Englishmen, they discussed the weather for a time—it was snowing again—the cancellation of yesterday's racing and football was lamented, and they were getting round to the latest change in the French Government when the door of the saloon opened and a young

man came in, alone, looking very cold, to stand beside them at the bar.

He was a man of somewhere, around thirty, with very good eyes, a good-tempered mouth and an otherwise nice, plain, ordinary face.

He leant across the bar as the landlord came up on the other side.

"Sonning," he demand in a low, urgent voice. "Is it true that Mr. Yalding's dead?"

The landlord looked grave and nodded. "True enough, Mr. Woodcote. Found dead in his bed yesterday morning and——" he gave a quick glance at the detectives—"they say it's murder."

"Good God! How awful!" Woodcote exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Don't seem much doubt about it, sir."

"How shocking! Now I wonder what on earth I'd better do?"

Sonning waited.

"You see," Woodcote went on, "I was due at the Yaldings' today to spend a night or so. I should have been there ages ago but the roads were so tricky that I got held up. I was so cold that I went to have a cup of tea in Oxford and while I was waiting for it I picked up a paper and the first thing that caught my eye was the name Yalding. There was just a small paragraph saying he was dead, suddenly, and in what the rag called 'mysterious circumstances'. I couldn't make up my mind what to do. I couldn't ring up the Yaldings and ask if it were true—I wasn't even sure if it was the same Yalding, so I thought I'd come on here and find out."

"Very awkward, sir," Sonning agreed. "It's true enough, I'm afraid."

"Poor Mrs. Benson! How dreadful for her."

"It is, indeed, and Mrs. Yalding, too."

"Well, give me a double whisky, Sonning, please. I think I need it, after all that."

While his drink was being poured out, Woodcote stood in silence, evidently thinking hard.

"Soda or water, Mr. Woodcote?" Sonning asked.

"Oh! Soda please. Look here, Sonning, have you got a room for me here, tonight? I've been thinking that the best thing I can do is to hang round till tomorrow and then see if there's anything I can do to help those poor women. I mean, there might be something I could do. After all, I've known them for years and a man around the place is always useful."

"Mr. Adrian's there, sir—and Mr. Benson too, come to that."

"Well, I don't suppose another will hurt. It's a pretty beastly situation for anyone to be in."

"Well," Sonning said. "Seeing you're an old friend of the family, Mr. Woodcote, and many's the time you've been in here with the young lady and Mr. Adrian, I should think they'd be glad to have you. Yes, I've got a room, if you want it."

"I do, please. And could I have some food?"

"Cold supper, being Sunday, any time you want it, as I told these gentlemen," he nodded towards the detectives.

"They're staying here, too. I'll go and tell my wife to get your bed made up."

He hurried off and Austen turned to young Woodcote.

"As we're fellow guests," he began. "Let's introduce ourselves, shall we? I must explain that we're from Scotland Yard to investigate Mr. Yalding's death."

Woodcote whistled. "Got to that, has it? Well, as you perhaps gathered from what Sonning said, my name's Woodcote, Miles Woodcote, and I'm a very old friend of the Yaldings'. I've known Carol ever since she was at school—friend of my sister's there. Bad business, this."

"It is," Austen agreed. "Now this is Inspector Curtis, this Sergeant Flyte, and I'm Superintendent Austen."

They exchanged the equivalents of "Pleased to meet you," and, as Sonning had just reappeared, followed them up by "What are you drinking?" and they all began to talk, the subject of the conversation being, most naturally in the circumstances, the murder of Walter Yalding.

9

AFTER a few minutes conversation, Austen summed up Miles Woodcote as a very pleasant young man, not, perhaps, overburdened with brains but very far from stupid; good humoured, nice-minded and well-behaved—in fact, a good public school product.

Miles was fascinated as well as shocked by Walter Yalding's death.

"Murder!" he exclaimed. "One just can't believe it. I mean, one never thinks of people one knows getting murdered, only——"

"Yes, I know," Austen broke in. He'd heard that sentiment so many times that, for him, it had become a cliché. "Only people in the newspapers."

"That's really what I meant," Miles agreed. "So what happens now?"

"I've got to find out who murdered him. That's what I'm here for."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I say, Mr. Austen, I'm getting rather a kick out of meeting you like this. I've read about you, of course, but to see you at work, so to speak! Well, it's quite something."

"Would you like to help me?" Austen asked.

"Would I! Just give me a chance."

"Well, tell me something about the Yaldings. You're a friend of theirs. How do they appear to you? What, for instance, did you think about Walter Yalding?"

The young man didn't find it altogether easy to express himself, but with a bit of prodding and some tactful ques-

tions, he said that Yalding was "Quite all right. Not exactly my cup of tea."

"How?" Austen wanted to know.

"Well, he was very much the business man, if you know what I mean. Bit of a snob, too, but he was awfully generous."

"In what way?"

"He threw marvellous parties and he gave Carol everything she wanted. She'd only to say she'd like something and she had it."

Woodcote wasn't an observant person and that was really all he knew about Yalding, except that his wife and daughter were "terribly fond of him".

When asked about Carol, he was enthusiastic. According to him she had no faults and was wonderful. It was evident that he was in love with her, whether he knew it or not.

Mrs. Yalding was "awfully pretty" and had been "awfully nice" to him—his vocabulary was a bit limited. Everyone liked her, he said, and he'd always been fond of her.

Then came the question of Guy Benson and, about him, Miles started by being what Flyte described as "cagey". He dismissed him briefly with: "Well, I never cared for him much."

Austen, very tactfully, probed and, by degrees, extracted opinions.

Benson was a rank outsider, was the summing up, and no one could understand why Carol had married him, except that she'd been so absurdly young and he'd taken advantage of it. None of her friends had any use for him.

They got on to Mrs. Lestrangle whom Miles hardly knew and Adrian Yalding, who was pronounced a good type and a thoroughly decent fellow, and after that, Miles had really nothing to contribute.

He was a friendly person and seemed to get on well with everyone. He was very impressed, evidently, by William Austen, and not only as a highlight of Scotland Yard.

"Look here, sir," he consulted him. "I'm in a bit of a difficulty as to what I ought to do about the Yaldings. I told you I'm supposed to be staying with them tonight?"

"You did."

"Well, things being as they are, they obviously won't want me now. They've probably even forgotten that they asked me. What do you think I ought to do about it?"

Austen considered for a second. "If I were you, I think I'd ring up the house and you'll probably find that the telephone is answered by a policeman—I've left one on duty there. Send a message by him that you've heard what's happened and you'll be calling in the morning to see if there's anything you can do for the family. That way, you see, if they've remembered that you were due there, they won't be worrying about whether you're going to turn up or not."

"Thanks awfully, sir. I'll do just that. It's a splendid idea."

Later on, the three detectives discussed their afternoon's work.

Austen had had a certain amount of luck with his search for traces of the Mysterious Stranger. He had, after a lot of preliminary frustration, got hold of the conductor of a local bus which had passed through the village of Mansfield on the previous Friday night. The conductor, not too pleased at being disturbed on a Sunday, his day off, remembered a man who boarded his bus at a stop somewhere between Oxford and Mansfield, and asked to be put down at the nearest stop to Lawn Lodge. He, also asked the times of the buses back.

The conductor couldn't add v'ry much to that. He didn't remember much at all abo't his passenger except his enquiries. He vaguely though, that he was a big red-faced man but that was all.

The bus in question was due in Mansfield shortly after 9 P.M. It then went on, through a couple more villages, reached the end of its route, and turned round to go back to Oxford, passing through Mansfield at 9 30. That was its last run for the night, and its conductor went off duty. He was sure that the big red-faced man hadn't been on that last run, because, had he been, he said, he would have asked him if he'd found Lawn Lodge all right.

The last bus of the day from Mansfield took a different route, serving some other villages and it left Mansfield at 10 P.M. Its conductor was also off duty on Sundays and Austen failed to get hold of him.

He had arranged with the bus company, however, that this man should be sent to Mansfield to see him on Monday morning when he came on duty again.

"That seems to me to explain the M S's sudden departure from Lawn Lodge," Flyte said, when Austen had finished speaking. "He suddenly realised that if he didn't get off pronto he'd miss his last bus, so he bolted without saying goodbye. Nothing sinister at all about it. He's still a Red Herring."

"It could be," Austen agreed. "Especially if we can establish that he did catch the last bus. Anyway, we can't do anything definite about him till tomorrow."

"Did he first board the bus in a village?" Curtis wanted to know.

"No. It was a roadside request stop, just like the one at the end of the lane leading to Lawn Lodge."

There was nothing more to say on that subject just then and Curtis and Flyte began on their findings.

The pillows first. There was nothing helpful about

them. The servants' beds were all equipped with good feather pillows, all bought from the same shop at the same time. The rest of the pillows were all down ones, except for Walter Yalding's, all identical in size, shape, filling and provenance. They really didn't help at all, nor, really, did the various cushions in the house which, while they weren't all the same, had no distinguishing characteristics.

There was, then, the question of peoples' movements on the Friday night.

The servants, who slept in the wing which contained the kitchen quarters and had its own staircase, were certain that they had heard no unusual noises in the night, nor had any of them been out of their rooms after 10.15 P.M.

The family said that they had all gone up to bed by half-past ten, with the exception of Guy Benson. He said that he'd left the Queen's Head at closing time and walked home. That would take him about ten minutes.

The front door had been unlocked when he got to the house, but he thought nothing of it. He went upstairs, found his wife asleep and had gone to bed himself and slept immediately. Neither he nor Carol had heard a sound all night. Adrian had the same sort of account to give of himself. He'd been in bed by eleven and hadn't wakened until he was called in the morning.

Mrs. Lestrangle and Mrs. Yalding were the only people who hadn't gone to sleep immediately.

Mrs. Lestrangle said that she always read in bed before she slept, and she had noticed that it was shortly after midnight when she put out her light. She had heard doors shutting before that, as her room was across a corridor from the two in which the Yaldings slept, and if she had thought anything of it—which she didn't particularly—she would have taken it for granted that it was her son-in-law coming to bed.

Annette Yalding was the only person who had gone out of her bedroom after she had settled in for the night.

Her husband, as she had previously explained, had come to her room to say goodnight. When he left her he had said that he was just going downstairs to lock up and would then go to bed, early though it was for him.

That, of course, accounted for Guy's finding the front door unlocked and its being duly locked in the morning.

After her husband had left her room, Mrs. Yalding said, she had suddenly remembered that she had an engagement to lunch with some friends on the following day, so she had gone along to Mrs. Lestrangle's room—she knew her mother would be awake and reading still—to ask her if she would like to come with her to the luncheon party.

Curtis had asked her why she had bothered with her enquiry that night. Why not leave it until the morning? but Mrs. Yalding explained that if she were going to take an extra guest to her friend's house she must let her know in good time in the morning. As Mrs. Lestrangle always slept late, she didn't want to wake her then.

Mrs. Yalding said that either when she was going to her mother's room or coming from it—she wasn't sure which—she had heard Guy stumbling up the stairs. She knew it was he because she'd heard him swearing.

"It did occur to me to wonder," Curtis put in here. "Whether Benson could have killed his father-in-law downstairs and carried him up and put him to bed, dead."

Austen shook his head. "That won't do," he said, "If Mrs. Yalding's story, that he took the sleeping tablets after midnight, is true. He must have been doped when he was smothered, or there'd have been signs of a struggle—and there weren't."

The last report the two younger men had to make was

about the possibility of anyone's having climbed up from outside, to Yalding's window.

They both agreed that such a thing could be done, quite easily, but that it didn't appear to have been. There wasn't a sign of a finger print, nor even the trace of gloved hands, on the pillar which would have had to be climbed, nor on the rail of the verandah.

There were fingerprints on the french window leading from the verandah into Yalding's room, but they had proved to be his own and the housemaid's.

Well, they had got through that lot of routine investigations and nothing more needed to be said about them, so the party broke up and went to bed.

It looked as though Monday were going to be a busy day; it certainly had an unpleasant start so far as the weather was concerned. The wind changed and the temperature began to rise before dawn, and slippery slushy roads made getting about more difficult. When, later on, the wind changed again and a slight frost iced the melting snow, driving became almost impossible.

The consequence of that was that the bus conductor didn't turn up at the appointed time and Austen had to get on with his day's jobs without having questioned him.

The inquest on Walter Yalding was held that morning at the village hall, but the only member of the family who attended it was Adrian, who gave evidence of identity.

The affair was extremely short and, to the villagers who had turned up in force, hoping for a bit of excitement, most disappointing.

The Coroner, too, had his day spoiled. He was very fond of the sound of his own voice, and had, so he thought, too little opportunity of hearing it. Inquests were his field days, in the ordinary way, but this one was adjourned at

the request of the police and he had no chance to let himself go.

The lawyer, Mr. Streetly, went to the inquest and Austen had a word with him afterwards.

‘I’m going back to the house now,’ Streetly announced. “To read the Will. I did as you asked me on Sunday, and gave no one any information about it beyond telling Mrs Yalding that she would be well provided for, so now I’ll let them have the whole works.”

“I thought the correct thing was funeral first. Will afterwards with the Sherry,” Austen chuckled

Streetly laughed. “It certainly used to be Medes and Persians, but that rule didn’t take account of murder. I thought I’d better be on hand for this inquest—as time’s money—mine, anyway—if I get this Will business over now, I shan’t have to make another journey for it.”

He broke off for a second, and then went on—“I suppose, Superintendent, you’re not prepared to give me a hint as to whether any of my clients are involved—criminally, I mean, of course.”

Austen shook his head, smilingly. “No. Not at the moment.

“Oh! by the way, who are Yalding’s executors?”

“I’m onc. Mrs. Yalding’s brother, Maurice, is the other.”

“Do you know him?”

Streetly nodded. “I’ve met him. A nice chap. A good business man, too, Yalding told me. Lives in Paris. I telephoned him last night and he’ll be over here, probably tomorrow. In time for the funeral, anyway. Incidentally, will it be all right with you if we arrange that for Wednesday?”

“The funeral? Oh yes. You’ve got the burial order from the Coroner; it’s up to you, now.”

“ Right you are. I’ll speak to the family about it. Well, I must be getting along. They’ll be waiting for me at the house.”

He went off and Austen, Curtis and Flyte went too. It was Austen’s opinion that Walter Yalding’s will would come as a considerable surprise—and, in at least one case, shock—to several of the people concerned, and he wanted to watch their reactions.

Lawn Lodge had been wrapped in gloom and despondency ever since its inmates had wakened. The mere thought of the impending inquest had hung, like a black cloud, over them all. The fact that none of them, except Adrian, had to attend it, didn’t really help a lot.

At first it had been thought that Annette, as the last known person to have seen her husband alive, would have had to be present, but Dr. Grange had been firm that she wasn’t physically fit for such an ordeal.

Austen, knowing beforehand that the inquest was going to be adjourned, and that, therefore her evidence wouldn’t be needed, had raised no objection to her absence, so she was spared any trouble about it.

Annette came downstairs on the Monday morning firmly determined that life must go on as usual, so far as it was possible.

She said to her mother the previous evening: “ I’ve had these two last days alone and I’ve faced things. It’s going to be a big readjustment for me, living without Walter, but I’ve got to get on with it. So far as I can I must take his place, and I’m not justified in giving myself up to mourning for him. I have accepted that, so I must just pull myself together and get on with it. You’ll stay here a little longer, won’t you Mama, and help me? ”

Mrs. Lestrangle smiled at her, very tenderly. “ My dearest child, I will stay so long as you want me, and any

help whatever that I can give is yours, without your asking for it."

The reading of the Will took place in the drawing-room and all the family were there, grouped around Mr. Streetly, with Austen, Curtis and Flyte discreetly in the background, posted at, so to speak, strategic points from which they could see everybody without being obtrusive.

The business didn't take long, for the lawyer suggested that he should tell them the terms of the testament in simple words, leaving them a copy of the actual document to read over afterwards if they wanted to.

The reactions of the various people were interesting. If looks were anything to go by, Adrian was both surprised and delighted by his legacy. Annette was evidently disturbed by the clauses penalising Guy Benson, while Carol remained passive. Mrs. LeStrange was imperturbable.

Benson was the one on whom the real impact came. When he heard how he was to be treated he jumped up from his chair looking black and angry.

He tried to speak, but Streetly told him to be quiet, so he sat down again, muttering angrily under his breath for a few minutes and then rushed out of the room.

At a nod from Austen, Flyte slipped out and the rest of the proceedings were uninterrupted.

They were also uneventful. Annette asked one or two practical questions about her tenure of Lawn Lodge, but that was all, and Mr. Streetly must have congratulated himself on the rapidity with which the business was disposed off.

He prepared to take his leave.

"I'd like you and Mrs. Benson to think all this over," he said to Annette. "And then let me know what decisions you come to. There's no hurry, you know; take your time and I'll come when you send for me."

Goodbyes were said and Adrian went with the lawyer into the hall. They stood there talking for a moment and then Streetly, who had been putting on his overcoat and gloves, went out to his car.

At that moment one of the inner doors burst open and Guy Benson, flushed and still looking angry, rushed into the hall, out of the front door and grabbed Streetly by the arm.

Austen and Curtis, who were just preparing to leave, too, heard Benson whose voice was raised almost to shouting pitch, demand: "Can my wife contest this will? It's a damned unfair one. I shall take proceedings on her behalf——"

Streetly paused, shaking off Benson's hand. "You try," he said, levelly, but with a threat in his voice. "You just try, my good young man. You haven't a hope in hell. I drew up that will myself, with just that sort of contingency in mind. There isn't a loop-hole anywhere."

He got into his car, slamming the door and drove off, leaving Benson standing in the snow, keeping himself warm, possibly, by the heat of his language.

Flyte came out of the house then, and the three detectives drove back to the Dog and Duck.

"What did Benson do when he left the drawing-room?" Austen enquired.

"Sought consolation," Flyte grinned. "He rushed into the dining-room, swearing to himself most extensively, dashed over to the sideboard and poured himself out a stiff drink. He put it down in once and had another. Then he filled his glass again and took it over to the window and stood there muttering. Suddenly he swallowed what was left and rushed into the hall."

"We heard what happened then," Curtis told him.

"That will gave him a very nasty shock. If Yalding warned him, as Benson says he did, that he wasn't going

to let him touch his money, he didn't believe it. If he killed Yalding, he'll be wondering bitterly why he did it."

When they got back to the Dog and Duck the detectives were met by Miles Woodcote, looking very cheerful.

"I took your advice, sir," he told Austen. "And telephoned a message to Carol last night. I said I'd be staying here and she rang me up this morning and asked me to go along to Lawn Lodge this evening and stay for a couple of days.

"I didn't feel quite comfortable about that, in the circumstances, you know, so I said was she sure it would be all right. She said: 'Of course it will. You'll save my life. Miles. I'm steadily going mad, cooped up here,' or something like that."

"So you're going there?" Austen asked.

"Rather—as she wants me. If you think it's O.K."

"Well, I'm glad you are going," Austen said. "I'm sorry for that girl, d'you know. She's not having a very pleasant time just now. It'll do her good to have someone of her own generation to talk to."

"She's got Adrian——"

"For practical purposes she hasn't. He's taken all the responsibility on his shoulders and he's up to his eyes in it."

"What about Benson?"

Austen smiled. "Speaking from observation and what she's told me, herself, I shouldn't say he's being much comfort to her. I'm betraying no confidences in warning you that you'll find they aren't on very good terms."

"Well, I'll do my best to cheer her up," Woodcote promised.

"What time are you bidden?"

"Somewhere round six," he said. "I've got the whole dreary afternoon to fill in first, worse luck."

"Would you like to do a job for me?"

The young man was so eager that he almost fell over himself.

"Just give a chance."

"Well, I need a chauffeur this afternoon. I've got one or two places to go to and the roads are bad, as you know. I don't like driving unless I can give my whole mind to it and, at the moment, I've got a number of things to think out. Are you on?"

"You bet I am."

"Then let's go and have our lunch. Bring a map of the district if you've got one and we'll plan our route."

While Woodcote was driving William Austen round Oxfordshire, the family at Lawn Lodge was having a conference.

They were all sitting round the drawing-room fire. Annette and Carol had been discussing their plans. Should they, or shouldn't they, stay on at Lawn Lodge? Annette seemed to be indifferent about it, with a slight bias towards not staying unless Carol particularly wanted to do so.

She did. "I love the place, Mummy," she said. "I was so utterly happy here as a child that I'd like Terry to grow up here too."

They talked a little about ways and means and re-arrangements—surface, trivial, unnecessary matters. They all knew that they were doing it to evade what was to them the biggest issue which had arisen out of Walter Yalding's will.

Carol was the one who found her courage first. She made one or two false starts and then she embarked.

She addressed herself directly to Annette.

"Mummy," she began, "I know you're dying to talk

about what father arranged about Guy, and you haven't liked to. That's true, isn't it? "

Annette nodded, without speaking.

" Well," Carol went on, " this concerns me most of all and there's no need to argue about it. I've thought it over and I've decided. I'm going to do what father wanted. I'm going to divorce Guy."

The others reacted instantly.

" No!" Annette cried. " You mustn't do that."

" That is impossible," Mrs. LeStrange pronounced.

" You can't do it," said Guy.

" I'm sure I can," Carol stated. " Father said I should be able to."

" Your father's dead," Guy answered.

" That doesn't make any difference."

" Look here," said Guy. " You seem to have overlooked the fact that I've given you no grounds for a divorce. I haven't been unfaithful to you; I haven't deserted you, and I haven't been cruel to you. We're not in America, you know. The English divorce court won't give you a divorce just because you say you want one."

" I shall ask Mr. Streetly," Carol announced. " Father told me that if I'd agree to a divorce he'd arrange it."

Benson didn't answer for a second, then he said slowly and deliberately: " Your father would have arranged it all right, Carol. He'd have bought it."

" What on earth do you mean? "

" The night he died he offered me £1,000 for evidence that I'd been unfaithful to you."

Little horrified sounds came from the two older women but Carol hardly even heard them. This was a duel now, between her and Guy."

" Did you accept it? " she demanded.

" I'm not going to tell you, but I will, now."

" Will what? "

"Accept it. You give me £500 and I'll give you proof."

Mrs. Lestrangle spoke then as quickly, impulsively, as though she were rushing to some door of escape.

"You know that is impossible," she stated. "Carol would lose all her money if she gave you any."

"Walter's will says that," Annette corroborated, with an air of relief.

Carol turned on them both, with a sharpness unusual in her.

"What is it, that you want?" she demanded, hotly. "You're right that Father's will says I can't give Guy a farthing. So what do you think I'm going to do if I don't divorce him—I and Terry. He mayn't live here, and do you think he'll make a living for us somewhere else? Can you see him doing it? Your idea is, I suppose, that Terry and I should go on living here and Guy is kicked out. That's just about what he deserves but it won't be very pleasant for me, will it? I shan't be either properly married or properly unmarried. I shall enjoy that!"

Mrs. Lestrangle said, quietly: "I understand your point of view, Carol, but we can make a compromise, I think. I have been considering this question ever since I knew what was in your father's will. I have decided that as your mother is forbidden to help you, if you remain with Guy, I will. There is nothing to prevent my doing that. I shall make you an allowance so that you may stay with your husband. It will not be a big one. I fear, I have not a great deal of money, but, if Guy works and earns, it will be enough for you to live on."

Annette murmured: "Mama! How wonderful of you! I can make it up to you——"

Carol got up and faced them all. "Grand'mère, you are very, very kind and generous, but—well, it won't do. It's nothing to do with money why I'm going to get a divorce. It's Guy himself. Do you think I'd go on living

with him now? Before yesterday I wasn't sure. I wanted to do what father wanted and thought was best, but I wasn't certain if I were prepared to divorce him. He showed me, himself, yesterday, how utterly impossible it was for me ever to live with him again."

"Carol! What *are* you talking about?" Benson demanded.

"What you said to me yesterday afternoon. You came smarmy round and said let's kiss and be friends and start all over again and that kind of thing—and then you let the cat out of the bag! *That* was when you thought father was sure to have left me lots of money, with no strings to it and you'd be able to live on it. It didn't take long for me to see through that."

She stopped for a second and took a deep breath. Like most even tempered people, when she got angry, she got very angry indeed.

"And now," she went on, looking straight at him, her blue eyes very bright, her face flushed. "Now, you tell me that father offered you £1,000 to let me divorce you—and you accepted it. I know you did. I know you, you see. And if I offer you £500—that's what I'm worth to you—you'll accept that."

"Very well, I *will* offer you it. It's no use talking about father's will and I can't do it and that kind of thing. I'll find a way. I'll go to Mr. Streetly and I'll tell him all about it and *he'll* manage it. *That* won't be giving money to you. It will be *paying* you, paying you what father intended to pay you, doing what he wanted done."

Again she paused, took a deep breath and went on.

"And you can get out," she said, with something like hatred in her voice. "You can go. Now. Today. I won't have you in this house another night. Go and go quickly and I hope I shall never never see you again."

IO

SHE finished speaking and ran quickly out of the room. She knew that if she stayed on another second she would burst into tears and she mustn't do that in public. It was bad enough to have made a scene in front of her mother and grandmother, but if they saw her crying too, it would be dreadful.

She rushed upstairs to her bedroom and locked the door and let the tears come as they would.

She was shaking all over as a result of having let herself go downstairs, for she hated rows, but this one had been forced on her, she felt. She did hope that she hadn't upset her mother too much—poor Mummy, who already had too much to bear. It was dreadful having to go against her but what was she to do? She couldn't, she wouldn't give way about the divorce, at least, she hoped she wouldn't, but they would argue with her, Mummy and Grand'mère, and she did so hate arguing. It made her feel awful.

Father had never argued, not really. He just told her what she was to do and she did it and it was always all right and she never had to worry about anything. That was what was so wonderful about him and he never made her decide things for herself if she didn't want to.

She loved her mother dearly and would do almost anything for her, but she wasn't the same as father. She didn't make you feel that, because she said something was the right thing to do, you were sure it was. Besides, she was

so unhappy, you couldn't expect her to take your troubles too.

Grand'mère was no use, either. She expected you to be strong and self reliant and make up your own mind about things. Father—— Poor Carol cried again for him. If only he were here! If only she had *someone* to cling to, to help her—someone who'd be on her side and not try to stop her divorcing Guy!

But she was going to. Father had said she ought to and she was going to do what he wanted.

Besides, *she* wanted it, too. She couldn't possibly stay with him, now that he'd shown her just how much he cared about her. She—she almost hated him, now. She saw that he'd never really loved her at all. He'd married her for the money he thought she was going to have and that was an awful thing. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before. People had always loved her and been good to her and never thought about money.

Reluctantly her mind came round to the thought which had come to her last night, after she'd realised that Guy only wanted her money. She'd tried to keep it in the background because it was so horrible, but she hadn't got rid of it. Supposing Guy had killed her father so as he thought, he'd be sure of the money!

She'd only just stopped herself from accusing him of that just now, downstairs, but she hadn't said it because it was too horrible to put into words and she couldn't let herself say it in front of poor Mummy, who was already so heart-broken.

Carol's unco-ordinated thoughts shifted again. She must be very very good to her mother and try to help her. Fancy losing—and in such a horrible way too—such a husband as father! No wonder her heart was broken. That was the kind of husband to have. If only she'd had one like that herself! Someone she could tell everything

to and who'd always know what was best for her and never worry her.

She felt dreadfully alone, forlorn. There was simply no one to turn to, to rely on.

Then, suddenly, a thought came to cheer her. Miles! He would be here this evening and she could depend on him. If only she'd married him instead of Guy! He'd told her once that he'd been going to ask her to and then she'd run away and got married before he had the chance.

Oh! thank goodness Miles was coming! He'd be here quite soon.

When Carol had run out of the drawing-room, Guy had quickly followed her and Annette and her mother were left alone together.

There was silence for a time, and then, suddenly, uncontrollably, Annette burst into tears.

It was the first time that anyone had seen her cry since Walter's death. Her weeping had been done in the night, in solitude.

Mrs. Lestrangle made no attempt to check her. She simply sat silently by, her handsome, arrogant face tender and anguished, her white, beautiful, beringed hands clasped tightly together in her lap.

Presently Annette raised her head and tried to dry her tears.

"I'm sorry, Mama," she said, chokingly. "I didn't mean to make an exhibition of myself. Carol gave me a shock. I didn't know that she felt like that about Guy—so strongly, I mean. I'd thought that they would come together again, now—without Walter, I mean. That—that—was the only consolation I could find for his death. But now—Oh Mama! What *am* I to do?"

For once Mrs. Lestrangle had no answer ready.

Presently she said, in a low voice: "My dearest child, perhaps it has been taken out of our hands, now!"

Annette shook her dark, shiring head. "No! No! there must be something——"

"We can pray," her mother said. "And I shall go to Confession. I shall talk to Father Peter. Perhaps he can advise us."

"Perhaps he can, Mama." Her voice held no hope.

After a pause, Mrs. Lestrangle murmured: "If only it had been Guy who had died, not Walter!"

"But it wasn't Guy," Annette said, sadly.

Mrs. Lestrangle laid a hand on her daughter's. "My child, let us try not to think too much of this, now. It is not a thing which can happen at once, this divorce. It will take time and many things may happen, many things may change. Do not, I advise, discuss it with Carol as yet. Let us ignore the subject. So many problems solve themselves if they are left alone."

"I hope you are right, Mama. It may be so. I shall do as you advise. But what about Guy?"

Mrs. Lestrangle thought that over.

"He must leave the house, of course. His presence will only make Carol more antagonistic to him."

"But not tonight——"

"No. Let him stay until after the funeral. That will look better. Then he must go and we can say that he had urgent business to attend to."

"How wise you are," her daughter agreed. "I will go and speak to him, and I shall advise him to keep out of Carol's way."

The afternoon went by pleasantly for Miles Woodcote. He enjoyed driving Superintendent Austen round the country in spite of the state of the roads, and he had an extra reward in Austen's conversation. From time to

time, in bits and pieces, Miles was regaled with True Detective Stories, straight from the detective's mouth.

Later in the afternoon Austen, Curtis and Flyte had a general recapitulation.

"This is one of those cases," Austen said, "which are so unsatisfactory. It has a motive, standing out a mile, and no facts to pin anyone to it. Also, the psychological factor is obvious. Almost no one liked Walter Yalding."

"Motive—money," Flyte interpolated. "Answer, Adrian Yalding?"

"Yes, but Guy Benson, too, unless he knew the contents of that will."

"Which he says he more or less did."

"I think that's too sweeping. He says that Yalding told him that, alive or dead, Benson wouldn't benefit from his money, but, even if it's true, he didn't know how impossible it would be made for him to benefit through his wife."

"That's true," Curtis agreed. "That will must have taken some thinking out and, in any case, Benson presumably didn't actually know it had been made and signed."

"Do you put Benson as first suspect, sir?" Flyte asked.

Austen shook his head. "Monetarily, Adrian is that. He didn't know how much he was going to get, but everyone, presumably including himself, guessed that it would be something substantial."

"Number one, Adrian, then?" Flyte queried.

"I said monetarily," Austen reminded him. "Psychologically, he's completely out. I firmly believe that he was devoted to his uncle and felt real grief at his death. Moreover, he isn't in need of money. I had the Yard report on him an hour ago. No women and no debts that anyone knows of. Bills paid regularly out of what is quite an

adequate income for a young man with no obvious extravagances. So why kill Uncle? "

"Quite," Curtis agreed. "Why? Mysterious Stranger, then? "

"We can't ignore him," Austen stated. "What's more, he isn't a mysterious, now. I think I've found him."

"What! Who is he? "

"If the man I've tracked down is the one we want, his name is Edgar Sykes, he lives at a place called Mitton End, a few miles out of Oxford. I did a real bit of routine work this afternoon—bus drivers, conductors, village shops, post offices and what have you—the kind of thing they'd probably have done in half the time from the Yard. Anyway, a man called Edgar Sykes, who answers to the description of Yalding's Friday night visitor, lodges at a house in Mitton End and was out on Friday evening. He's out today, too, but expected home late tonight.

"I've had a message from the Yard, too, concerning him. They sent a man to Yalding's office this morning, and the receptionist there definitely recognised the description of the man."

"But Henley said no one at that office knew him," Curtis objected.

"That's so, but apparently there was some sort of misunderstanding. Henley spoke to someone on the executive side and they said they had no 'Account'—that's what they call their clients—who answered to the description. Our man isn't an 'Account'; he's just an ordinary caller and was never properly seen by anyone but the receptionist. She remembered him all right. He's been to the office several times but he's never given his name. The first time, he sent in a note to Yalding, who saw him and, after the man had gone told the receptionist, that he wasn't to be admitted again. He came at least twice more, but got a dusty answer and

left in a temper. That's all that's known about him that end."

"So he really does exist?" Flyte commented.

"Presumably. It now remains to be seen whether he has any importance or not. It may be a definite lead and I hope to verify it is."

Then he left that subject. "Now, what about your afternoon's work?"

Curtis smiled. "It was probably a lot easier than yours and certainly warmer, but not rewarding, I'm afraid."

He and Flyte had spent their time going over the papers in Walter Yalding's study, looking for anything which might be of interest or have bearing on his death and its cause.

The only specific thing which they had hoped they might find was a note of the provisions of his will.

Had they been able to find such a thing, it would at least have proved that some member of the household might have seen it and thus, perhaps, have given a lead in that direction.

"There wasn't a thing," Curtis reported. "Not one single solitary pointer to anything except that he was a hoarder of letters.

"There was a packet of letters from his wife, all very affectionate. There weren't many of them; they don't seem to have been separated often.

"There was a whole file of stuff about his daughter: school reports, letters, her baby efforts at drawing—you know the kind of thing. There was the same about his nephew. Nothing was in the least noteworthy and there wasn't a business document in the place."

"Presumably what we've heard is true," was Austen's comment. "He kept his business completely out of his private life. That's another hope gone west. I'm arrang-

ing for someone to go through his private office, tomorrow, in case there should be something there to give us a lead. I haven't much hope, though."

Miles Woodcote duly arrived at Lawn Lodge in the early evening and was being shown up to his bedroom by Elsie the parlour-maid, just as Carol was coming out of her baby's nursery.

She was crossing the landing as Miles was halfway up the stairs. He saw her and called out to her. She stopped, leaned over the baluster and said: "Hello Miles! I am so glad to see you."

At that second a door opened and Guy Benson came out.

"*There* you are!" he shouted. "I knew I'd get hold of you sooner or later. So you thought you'd got rid of me, did you? You dirty little bitch!"

He swung round and with an open hand hit her hard across the face.

She stumbled and fell back, hitting her head against a door jamb.

Guy hit her again as she tried to get her balance. She fell, Miles raced upstairs and caught Benson behind the ear with a clenched fist.

There was a free for all then. Miles and Benson were fighting, Carol was trying to keep out of the way. Elsie ran up to get a good ringside seat just as the chauffeur, carrying Miles' suit-cases, appeared from the back stairs.

The fight was short and sharp. The protagonists were hauled apart, protesting, and Guy, with a bleeding nose, retreated into the room from which he'd first appeared, Gates, the chauffeur, standing on guard outside.

Carol was struggling to her feet. She was determined not to cry, but she was shaking all over and her breath came in gasps.

Her face was white except for the scarlet stain of Guy's fingers on one cheek, where a small trickle of blood was oozing down.

Miles, seeing her like that, was shocked and scared and rushed to help her. As he lifted her to her feet he murmured comfort to her and she clung to him, tightly.

Presently he said: "Let me help you to your room. I'm sure you ought to lie down."

He put an arm around her as he led her to her bedroom, where she sank, thankfully, down on a chaise-longue.

He looked more closely at the marks on her face. "The unutterable swine," she heard him say under his breath.

She was still trembling, though not quite so much and he wondered what he ought to do for her.

"Carol!" he cried, eagerly. "Can you tell me where you are hurt?"

"My shoulder," she said, her voice low but getting steadier. "And my head—at the back here"

She put up a hand to show him where, under her hair, a lump was swelling.

He was so angry that he could hardly speak, but the anger, of course, was against Benson. He had nothing but compassion and tenderness for her.

"I'll go and fetch your mother," he told her. "Something ought to be done for that cut on your cheek."

She put a hand to her face and saw blood on her fingers when she took them away.

"That must have been Guy's ring. No, Miles, please don't fetch Mummy. She's upset enough as it is. Ring the bell for Doris. She'll know what to do."

Doris came very quickly, full of curiosity and solicitude. She'd heard a lurid account of the scene on the landing from Elsie and was thrilled.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, when she saw Carol's face.

"You poor thing! How awful! Now, what you want is some arnica and some iodine. Just you hold on a second and I'll go and get it."

She ran out of the room and Carol turned to Miles.

"I'll be all right, now. Doris will look after me. You go downstairs and get yourself a drink. I'll come down as soon as I can."

"Oughtn't you to go to bed, Carol? "

She shook her head and then winced, as the bruise on it hurt her.

"I'd rather not. I'll soon get over this and I don't want to be alone. Oh Miles! I can't tell you what a comfort it is to have you here."

He put an arm around her. "I'll always be here when you want me. Don't forget that. Carol, what made that—that—Benson attack you? "

She shuddered. "Don't let's talk about it now. I'll tell you the whole story some other time."

"He mustn't be allowed to come near you. It isn't safe."

"But how can I stop him—? "

"You leave that to me, my dear. I'll see to that."

She sighed with relief. "I'm going to divorce him, Miles."

"Thank God for that! I've always loathed the thought of—"

Doris came hurrying back with the first-aid kit and he broke off his sentence and, with a final word of solicitude, left the room.

On the landing, Gates was still on guard outside Benson's door.

"I've locked him in," he said, conspiratorially when he saw Miles. "Carrying on something awful he is, in there; cursing and swearing and saying he's going to kill Mrs.

Benson and you, Sir. He's been drinking all the afternoon on and off, and he's not responsible for himself now. What'd you like me to do, Sir? If you ask me, I'd leave him locked in there till he works it off."

"I think you're right 'there," Miles agreed. "For the present, at any rate. I'll go and talk it over with Mr. Adrian."

Carol came down to the drawing-room a little later and found Miles and Adrian in conference over a drink.

She looked lovely in spite of her marked cheek and the patch of adhesive over the cut, which make-up hadn't been able to hide.

She was wearing a billowing black velvet house coat, with a petal-like white collar which framed her face like the calyx of a flower and made her look touchingly young.

"What you need," said Adrian, when he'd asked her how she was feeling. "Is a nice stiff drink."

He poured her out a glass of brandy and soda and she drank it gratefully.

"That feels better," she was saying, when the door opened and Mrs. L. strange and Annette came in.

Annette spoke to Miles, welcoming him and saying how glad she was to see him and then, suddenly, she caught sight of her daughter's face.

"Carol! My darling!" she exclaimed. "What have you been doing—"

Carol began, quickly: "Oh! I fell—"

Miles, who wasn't willing to let Benson's iniquities be hidden, broke in

"Benson hit her, Mrs. Yalding, and knocked her down."

Annette gasped. "Oh! How dreadful! He did it on purpose, do you mean?"

"Yes."

Carol had something to say, then. "He'd have done it again, Mummy, if Miles hadn't been there and stopped him. I wasn't going to tell you, tonight, but as you know, I'll tell you some more. My mind is absolutely made up now. I shall divorce Guy as quickly as I can. There won't be any need to wait or pay Guy for giving me evidence, now. I've got it. Both Miles and Elsie saw him hitting me."

Mrs. Lestrangle said in an anxious, restrained voice: "There must be some explanation—"

"There is," Carol told her. "He was mad with me because I'd said he'd got to leave this house."

Adrian said: "I don't think the reason matters. It's what he actually *did* that counts. We can't risk his attacking Carol again."

"You mean—" Annette began.

"That he ought to be thrown out, now, tonight."

"Oh dear!" Annette moaned. "I'd told him that he could stay until after the funeral."

"And so he must," Mrs. Lestrangle put in, firmly. "It is only *convenable*. After all, he is Annette's son-in-law, it would not be *comme il faut* for him not to be present when Walter is buried."

Carol said indignantly: "I don't think it's even right for him to go to Father's funeral at all. He hated him. Perhaps he even—" She bit that off and finished up rather lamely: "And I don't think *comme il faut* comes into it."

The Yaldings were not, as a family, given to quarrelling, or even to argument. You can't after all, argue successfully with someone who believes he is always right and says so, and the habit of acquiescence is apt to grow, in such circumstances.

With Walter's omniscience removed, however, there

was no one to set them all right and tonight they did more than argue; they disagreed.

What was to be done about Guy Benson was the subject of the contention and Carol, at least, got quite heated about it. He must go.

Finally, Adrian had the last word. Putting on, as well as he knew how, an air of Head of the Family, he said, firmly: "I think you'd better leave this to Miles and me. Guy can't do any harm tonight. He's locked up and he can stay locked up until the morning and then we can go and see what frame of mind he's in then, and decide accordingly."

That seemed to settle that, for the moment.

Carol said: "Well, if you two make yourselves responsible, I won't worry. I shall lock my bedroom door, of course, and, in the morning, I shall go and see Mr. Streetly about a divorce. Nothing will make me change my mind about that."

It was surprising to Annette to hear her daughter speaking with such decision. She approved of it, though she regretted the subject of it. She was turning this over in her mind, when she heard Miles say, in a low, determined voice.

"Carol, the minute you're free, you're going to marry me."

Carol looked away and said nothing, but she flushed hotly and, at the same time, smiled.

Adrian said, changing the subject: "By the way, which room is Guy in?"

Carol answered that. "The little bachelor one beyond the nursery. I told Doris to take all his things there, this afternoon, out of my room. That's partly why he was so wild with me, I expect. That made him see that I meant what I said."

"Who has the key? You, Miles?"

Miles shook his head. "Gates put it in his pocket when he'd locked Benson in."

"Half a minute!" Adrian sounded urgent. "That room opens onto the balcony. Guy could get out that way—"

"Gates locked the french window, too."

"He seems to have thought of everything."

Miles laughed. "To tell you the truth, Adrian, I have a feeling that Gates was getting his own back about something. He's a pretty tough chap. Guy evidently isn't a favourite of his and he handled him pretty roughly. I felt he was doing a little private gloating over the whole business."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Guy has no idea how to treat servants. They all dislike him and hate doing anything for him and what Guy did to Carol made Gates see red—I did too, I'll admit it."

Carol broke in, half laughing: "I don't think you treated him too tenderly, Miles, from what I saw of him after you'd finished with him."

"Much too tenderly for my liking," Miles told her. "I'd like to go back and give him a little more of what he's asking for."

Annette put in: "I do wish that Gates hadn't been involved in all this—unpleasantness. One doesn't like to feel that the servants know all about one's private troubles."

"I'm afraid it can't be helped, now, Aunt Annette," Adrian said. "I gather that Elsie saw Guy knock Carol down, so it's all over the village by now, any way."

"I find it all highly distasteful," Mrs. Lestrangle stated. "One deplores the ill breeding of the whole affair."

Carol gave a little impatient sigh. "Well, it's happened and we can't do anything about it, now. Does anyone mind if we stop talking about it?"

Annette, the tender hearted, couldn't drop the subject until she had said: "Someone must see how Guy is and whether he wants some food."

"Gates can do that," Adrian told her, "but I doubt if it will make any difference to Guy. From what I've heard he's not likely to take any interest in anything before morning and then he'll have a hangover that he won't forget in a hurry."

Dinner hadn't been over long when Mrs. Lestrangle, who had been watching her daughter intently, spoke with authority.

"Annette, you are tired out. You had better go to bed and you must take something to make you sleep. I shall come and see that you do so."

Annette obediently got up. "I think you're right, Mama. I have a dreadful headache."

They went upstairs together to Annette's room and sat down there by the fire.

Mrs. Lestrangle sighed, heavily. "This situation is worse than I had feared. There can be no hope of a reconciliation now."

"No," Annette agreed. "One could not permit it, even. I had been thinking, Mama, that, in the circumstances, a divorce would be allowable."

"If she didn't marry again. But you heard what Miles said?"

"Yes, I did. She would want to marry. It is only natural."

"And that would be wrong. My child, I cannot see a way out of this impasse."

"And yet there must be one, surely. I have thought and thought—"

Mrs. Lestrangle got up with a decisive air.

"My dearest child, you are making yourself ill with

thinking. I insist on your going to bed at once. I will bring you your sleeping tablets."

"I don't want them, Mama. I don't like the idea. I'm very tired. I shall sleep."

"I shall put them by your bedside, all the same and you must take them if you do not sleep. Do not permit yourself to lie awake worrying. Dr. Grange said that sleep was essential for you."

"Dr. Grange is very sweet, but he fusses about me too much. I shall be all right."

"Then sleep, my child, and waken rested. Who knows what solution of our troubles the night may bring."

Gradually peace descended on Lawn Lodge. Bedroom doors shut behind their inmates, lights went out, and, surrounded by a snow-bound world, all was still and quiet.

Suddenly a loud, sharp crash rang through the house, waking the sleepers.

Miles and Adrian were the first out of their rooms. They met on the landing.

"That sounded like a shot," Adrian said, quickly. "Didn't you think so?"

"Yes. Where did it come from?"

"Up here, somewhere."

They spoke jerkily; staccato

Miles cried: "Carol!" and rushed to her room, banged on the door.

Her sleepy voice answered: "Yes? What d'you want? What was that noise?"

"Nothing," Miles reassured her. "I only wanted to make sure you were all right."

A sort of confused coming and going developed then. Carol huddling on her dressing gown, rushed to the night nursery to find her baby sleeping sweetly and Nanny sitting up in bed, startled.

Adrian began to bang on the door of Guy's room, but got no answer to knocking or calling.

He cried urgently to Miles: "We must get his door open!"

Mrs. Lestrangle and Annette had by this time, appeared, wrapped in dressing-gowns, demanding what was happening.

No one answered them.

"Where's the key?" Adrian called out.

"Gates has got it, of course. He sleeps over the garage," Miles reminded him.

"Damn! We must break the door down, then."

"You'll never do that," Carol put in. "Those doors are all inches thick. Try one of the other keys."

The first one they tried fitted and the door was flung open. Miles and Adrian, one of them switching on a light, rushed in, Carol close behind.

After one hurried glance Miles pushed Carol back.

"Not in here!" he cried and banged the door shut.

Guy Benson lay on his bed as if he were sleeping, but there was blood on his head, running down over his face; blood on the pillow blood on the sheet and clutched in the hand which lay outside the bed clothes, was a gun

I I

THE two men stood staring at Guy in startled silence for a second; then Miles found words.

"Good God! He's shot himself! "

"How utterly ghastly! D'you think he's dead, Miles? "

Miles put out a hand to feel Guy's wrist but Adrian pulled it back.

"We mustn't touch him if he's dead," he warned

"But damn it, we've got to find out."

For answer Adrian looked quickly round the room and then picked up a shaving mirror from the dressing-table, held it to Guy's mouth and then examined it and showed it to Miles.

"Not a sign of breathing "

"We'd better send for the doctor, all the same," Miles stated.

"Of course. Oh God! This means the police all over again, I suppose."

"Yes, if he's really dead! Pretty grim, isn't it? "

"Horrible. Look here, Miles. You go and telephone, and I'll break the news to Carol and Aunt Annette—more shocks for them, poor darlings! "

The three women were huddled together on the landing when Adrian went to them.

He said, quickly: "I've got bad news. Guy's had an accident."

"What's happened? " Carol cried "How bad? Are you trying to break news, Adrian? Is he—is he—"

"Yes, I'm afraid he's dead," Adrian said, gently.

"But—but how?"

He hesitated before he answered. "You'll have to know sooner or later—it looks as though he's shot himself."

Carol covered her face with her hands, murmuring something inaudible; Mrs. Lestrangle crossed herself and prayed softly in French. Annette opened her mouth to speak, but, instead, made a little moaning sound and collapsed on the floor.

It was probably a good thing for the other two, especially Carol, that she did so, for, of necessity, their minds were diverted from their shock and horror while they attended to her.

Mrs. Lestrangle, with stern practicality, took command and, with Adrian's help, Annette was carried to her room and laid on her bed.

Carol, tears streaming down her face, fussed ineffectually, until her grandmother spoke sharply to her.

"Pull yourself together, Carol. Go to my room and bring me the brandy flask which is in the drawer by my bed."

The girl went running, thankful to have a job to do.

Mrs. Lestrangle turned to Adrian. "Go and telephone Dr. Grange.

"Miles is doing that."

"Good. Then you had better go away. There is nothing for you to do here."

Adrian would never have thought of disobeying Mrs. Lestrangle; he obeyed without a query and ran downstairs to find Miles.

Carol returned to her mother's room with the flask. Annette was still lying white and unconscious on her pillows.

"Mummy, Mummy—" Carol began.

"She cannot hear you, my child. Calm yourself," Mrs Lestranger ordered.

"But can't I do *something*?"

Her grandmother looked at her with pity.

"You can do no good here, my dear. Go back to your room and try to sleep."

Carol shuddered. "I *couldn't*. I want to stay with Mummy."

"You will only be in the way and perhaps even do harm. We can do nothing until the doctor comes. Why do you not go downstairs so that you can let him in when he arrives?"

That seemed a good suggestion to Carol and she ran down. The drawing-room door was open and lights and voices were coming from it. She went in to find Miles and Adrian there. They had revived the fire and were standing by it, glasses in their hands.

"Come and get warm," Adrian greeted her.

Miles pushed an armchair up to the fire for her and then went to pour her out a glass of brandy.

"Put that back quickly," he ordered.

Adrian asked, "How is Aunt Annette?"

Carol shook her head. "Still unconscious. I wish the doctor would come."

"He won't be long now," Miles assured her.

The brandy had warmed and revived her and she began to ask questions about Guy.

"Try not to think about it," Adrian urged.

"Of course I can't stop. I must know—"

The doorbell rang then and Adrian went to let Dr. Grange in.

The two of them went up to Guy's room and Miles was left behind to comfort Carol.

Presently Adrian came back alone.

"He's quite dead," he said, sombrely. "Grange has

gone to Aunt Annette and he says we've to send for the Scotland Yard people from the Dog and Duck. I'm going to telephone now."

It didn't take him very long, fortunately, to have Austen roused, and when he'd told him what had happened and got some instructions, he went back to the drawing-room.

"The Superintendent's coming at once," he reported. "He'll want to see all of us, he says. Carol, are you warmer, now, or do you think you'd better go and dress?"

She said, disconsolately: "I don't know *what* to do, Adrian. I'll do anything you tell me to, but this is all so—so awful, I can't believe it's true. I don't seem able to think even. Guy can't have killed himself. He wouldn't, you know. He's not that sort of person. If he did, it's my fault, you see, because I said I was finished with him."

"No, no!" Miles exclaimed quickly. "You mustn't think that, Carol. He was frightfully drunk, you know. He can't have known what he was doing."

That comforted her a little.

"He was like that," she admitted. "When he'd had too much to drink he used to say the most stupid things and make threats of what he'd do to people and things like that."

Then she broke off. "I wonder how Mummy is. I think I hear someone coming downstairs."

She sprang to her feet and went to the door and met Dr. Grange there and bombarded him with anxious questions.

"She'll be all right," he comforted her. "But she must be kept quiet. She isn't at all strong, you know, and these two shocks, coming one on top of the other, have been too much for her."

"I must go to her—" Carol began, but the doctor dissuaded her.

"I think you'd better not," he said. "Mrs. Lestrangle is looking after her and if she sees you when she comes round properly, she'll only worry about you. I've given her an injection and I hope she'll sleep, now."

Then he turned his attention to Carol herself.

"What about you, child?" he asked. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right," she assured him. "Just a bit shaky, but that's all."

He spoke to Adrian then. "You got those detectives all right?"

"They're on their way," Adrian told him.

"Good," he said. "Carol, go and waken one of the servants and get some coffee and sandwiches made. We may have a long session and I expect we should all be the better for something to eat."

When she had gone to see to that, he turned to the two young men. "The more we can find for her to do, the better for her," he told them. "She doesn't seem to have taken in, quite, what has happened but the longer it is before she does, the better for her. Keep her busy. That's the idea. Poor girl! I've known her for years, you know, and she never seems to me to have grown up properly. She will now, I should think, without her father to bear her troubles for her. Fancy that child being a widow!"

His musings were cut short by the arrival of William Austen, Curtis and Flyte.

"You think it's suicide?" Austen asked the doctor.

"It looks obvious, Superintendent."

"Well, we'll go and see, if you'll lead the way."

The three Scotland Yard men and Dr. Grange stood

round Guy Benson's bed. Every available light had been turned on.

For some seconds they were all silent, then Austen spoke.

"Did you say suicide, Doctor?"

Grange nodded. "Obvious, isn't it?"

"Not to me. That's no more suicide than I am."

"What on earth do you mean, Superintendent?"

"Well, look."

"I have done. Carefully."

"Look again, then."

Grange did so, walking round the bed, and, observing the body from both sides of it.

Curtis, having observed what his senior officer had, was making notes. Flyte was frankly grinning.

"Sorry," the doctor reported. "I don't see what you mean."

Austen pointed at the dead hand. "I take it that you haven't moved the body. Doctor?"

"No. I didn't touch it more than was necessary to decide that he was dead. I know enough for that, anyway."

Austen chuckled. "Don't take offence. You're not so used to these things as I am."

"What things?"

Again Austen pointed. "Murder faked to look like suicide."

Grange gasped. "You don't mean—?"

"I do. Now, just examine this set up. Body all correct, gun clutched in the right hand to suggest that the hand fell onto the bed after the shot was fired."

"Yes."

"Well, the intention was excellent; the execution faulty. Take another look at the wound in the head and tell me if any man who wasn't a contortionist could have

shot himself in that place and at that angle with his right hand."

"Good God! I'd never have thought of such a thing!"

"Just what I said, more or less. You weren't looking for any funny business, so you didn't see it. You saw just what you were meant to see—gun in hand—wound in head, suicide."

"And you didn't?"

Austen laughed and said: "No. None of us did. We've got suspicious minds and our first reaction was: 'Is there anything wrong with this'—and there was."

"Well, I'll be damned," said the doctor. "That'll be a lesson for me, in the future. Of course, now you point it out, I can see it for myself."

Suddenly his rather excited interest died.

"I say, this is even worse than it looked, isn't it—from the family's point of view?"

"Yes."

"It's murder?"

"It is."

"Oh God! Those poor women!"

"It is a bit much, I agree. Two murders in one family, in one house within a few days isn't easy to take."

"Must they be told?" the doctor almost pleaded

"My dear Dr. Grange," Austen said, not unsympathetically, "You know as well as I do that they must. They'll have to know."

"But in heaven's name, who could have done it?"

"That's what I shall have to find out. We must get to it." He turned away from the doctor and said to Curtis:

"Fingerprints first, I think, Flyte——"

"Sir?"

"Go and telephone the local police surgeon. I want him at once."

Then his attention went back to Dr. Grange.

"You said that Woodcote and young Yalding found the body, didn't you?"

"Yes?"

"Flyte ask them to come here, please. Now, doctor, I don't think we shall need you any more, thank you."

The doctor turned to go and then stopped.

"If you want those boys here, I wonder, Superintendent, if you could finish with one of them quickly and let him go back to Carol. She shouldn't be alone. I'll stay with her until someone else can take over. It's delayed shock I'm afraid of."

"Send her to her mother," Austen suggested.

"I can't. Mrs. Yalding collapsed and she's in a bad state. She's a delicate woman, you know. I've given her an opiate and Mrs. Lestrangle is looking after her."

Austen considered things for a moment.

"I'll release someone as soon as I can."

Dr. Grange hurried out and Austen, who was walking round the room, examining everything spoke to Curtis, who was busy with his finger-print outfit.

"Very amateurish this. Complicates things a bit, doesn't it, old chap?"

"Or simplifies it," Curtis suggested. "What did Benson know about Yalding's murder? One presumes he had to be kept quiet about something."

"In perpetuity."

"Uhm. It eliminates him, anyway. If only he had shot himself we should have had a nice tidy ending. Murderer commits suicide through remorse or fear that we're finding him out."

"Yes, that would have been most satisfactory. Now we've got another motive for another murder to find—or have we?"

‘What do you mean?’

Austen laughed. “One of my tiresome ideas, I’m afraid. Same motive, same murderer.”

“But it couldn’t be, in this case.”

“You probably know best, Curtis. You usually do.”

“I can’t see a motive, though, except to shut Benson’s mouth.”

“Oh! I can if you play it that way.”

“What, then?”

“Revenge. Someone knows that Benson murdered Yalding and finishes him off.”

Curtis chuckled, heartily. “Why not leave it to the hangman, in that case?”

“Why not? I agree with you.”

There was a knock at the door and Adrian and Miles came in, both looking ill at ease and worried.

“Dr. Grange says you’ve decided that Guy didn’t shoot himself, Sir,” Miles stated, anxiously.

“Well, it doesn’t look much like it,” Austen told him.

“Would you mind explaining?”

Austen explained.

“Good God! that’s horrible!” cried Adrian. “Suicide would have been bad enough, but this means—murder!”

“It does.”

“It couldn’t have been an accident?”

“It couldn’t. You can see that for yourself, can’t you? Now you two found Benson dead. I want to hear all about it.”

Together they told him all they knew, while he listened intently.

“You say Benson had been locked in here?” he demanded, when their account was finished. “Why?”

Both young men hesitated.

“Well,” Miles said, at last, “there’d been a bit of unpleasantness earlier on——”

" You should have started with that. Let's hear all about it, now."

They seemed to find the subject rather embarrassing, to start with, but presently Miles, as chief actor, got into his stride and Austen got a brisk account of what had led up to Guy's imprisonment.

" Right," Austen said. " Let's recapitulate. Benson was drunk and a bit battered. Gates, the chauffeur shoved him in here, locked the french window and the door and that was that. Now, if the doors were locked and Gates had the keys, how did anyone get in here to shoot Benson? Do you suggest that Gates could have done it? "

Adrian was startled at the suggestion. " I'm sure that's out of the question."

" Why? "

" Well, he'd have no reason to."

" Sure of that? What was his attitude to Benson? "

" He didn't like him, but nor did anyone else."

" No particular grudge or grievance? "

" Well, not that I know of."

" Half a minute," Miles put in. " Gates couldn't have done it. He sleeps over the garage. He couldn't have got into the house. Adrian went round and locked up before we went to bed."

" Did you? " Austen wanted confirmation.

Adrian nodded. " My uncle used to do it. I've done it every night since he died."

" Then," said Austen, slowly. " In that case, someone inside the house must have done it. From your account that would be possible, seeing the other bedroom keys fit this lock."

" How did they get away in that case? " Adrian asked.

" You mean that you two were on the landing and no one could have come out of here without your seeing them? "

" Exactly."

" No servants appeared when the shot was fired? "

Adrian said: " No. They couldn't have heard it, you know. They sleep right over in the far wing, and there's a baize door shutting it off."

" Was the shot very loud? "

" It sounded so to me," Miles contributed, " but I wasn't thoroughly asleep. I don't think it actually woke me."

" Yalding? "

" I'd been to sleep and something woke me. but I'm a fairly light sleeper. It seemed a definitely loud noise to me, and I was sure it came from inside the house."

Austen thought that over. " Well, we'll leave that for the time being. Where did the gun come from? Was it Benson's? "

Adrian shook his head. " I wouldn't know, but my uncle had one."

" Oh! Where did he keep it? "

" That I couldn't be sure of, but he had one, all right. He showed it to me once. He took it out of a drawer in his study. There was a burglar scare round here a couple of years ago, robbery with violence, and he got it then. He said that every householder should have the means of defending himself and his property if he lived in an out of the way place like this."

" Permit? "

" Oh yes! All correct."

" You know how to use a gun, I suppose? "

Adrian nodded. " I've done my Army service "

" You, too, Woodcote? "

" Yes, sir."

" Right, then. Woodcote, I've finished with you, for the time being. You may go and look after Mrs. Benson and Dr. Grange can get away. Yalding, I want a few more words with you, please."

Adrian looked worried and uncomfortable.

"Yes?" he queried, tentatively.

Austen smiled. "No need for you to get worked up over it. It's merely that I've a few questions to ask you that you'd probably prefer not to answer in front of Woodcote."

There was an obvious relief of tension.

Then Austen went on: "I want your private not-to-be-repeated opinion of the likelihood of Woodcote's having murdered Benson."

Adrian caught his breath. "Oh! Impossible! Utterly!"

"Why?"

"Well, he wouldn't you know. He's not that sort of chap. Why should he, anyway?"

"He's in love with Mrs. Benson."

"Yes—perhaps he is, but all the same——" he left the sentence in mid-air.

Austen pursued it. "But what?"

Adrian took a moment for thought. Then he said:

"Something like this, I think. Miles knocked Guy down this evening because he saw him hitting Carol. If Guy hadn't been drunk and Gates hadn't interfered, Miles would probably have got really down to it and given Guy what he deserved. Miles was seeing red—with good cause. I'd have felt like that, myself, if I'd been there. But this"—he nodded in the direction of the bed—"was thought out. Well, Miles wouldn't do that."

"Kill in cold blood, you mean?"

"Exactly. Besides——" he paused again.

"Besides what?" Austen prompted.

"Well, why should he? You're suggesting that he could have done it to get Carol's husband out of the way, aren't you?"

"That was the inference."

"But, you see, there wasn't any need for that. Carol was going to get a divorce."

"Was she? Are you sure of that? When I last spoke to her on the subject, she was undecided."

"Yes, but she'd made up her mind this afternoon—yesterday afternoon, I suppose it is by now. She told us all so, including Guy himself. Something had happened—I don't know what it was—to clinch it. That's obviously why he attacked her. Then, after that, after he hit her, I mean, she said it again."

"Said that she was going to get a divorce? "

"Yes."

"You can't by any chance, remember exactly what she said? "

"I'm afraid not; but the gist of it was that now there was no need to bribe Guy to supply evidence of infidelity; she could divorce him for cruelty and she was going to see Streetly—our lawyer—about it in the morning. That is, this morning."

"Who heard her say that? "

"All of us. The whole family and Miles, too."

"And your argument is that Woodcote had no need to get rid of Benson in order to set Carol free. The law would do it less messily, as it were? "

"Yes. That's just what I do mean. You know, Mr. Austen, this whole business defeats me. Why should anyone murder my uncle? Why should anyone murder Benson? "

"It seems fantastic to you? You've no theories? "

"None. I thought I had a first-class one, but you've knocked that on the head."

"Meaning? "

"You've proved that Guy didn't commit suicide."

"And, if he had done? "

"It looked obvious to me. Guy and Uncle Walter had

a row the night before my uncle's death. I don't know what it was about—only Guy's version, I mean, but supposing uncle said something that made Guy feel he'd do better with Uncle Walter out of the way? So he killed him. Then he got the wind up that you knew what he'd done and shot himself."

"A good enough theory but, as you say, it won't work. But, tell me, are you now dismissing the idea that Benson killed Mr. Yalding?"

Adrian looked puzzled for a second. "I suppose I was."

"You're, so to speak, now assuming that both murders were done by the same person?"

Adrian thought that over at some length. "Yes, I expect I was," he said, at last. "One doesn't easily presuppose two murderers, does one?"

Austen laughed. "In my job one both can and does. Benson *could* have murdered your uncle, you know."

"Yes?"

"He had, in common with everyone else in this house, means and opportunity, and, if he were in ignorance of the terms of your uncle's will, he had a strong motive. Think that over."

"But——" Adrian was frankly perplexed. "Then why should anyone murder Guy?"

"That's what I have to find out."

"You haven't any idea?"

Austen hedged. "Well, it's a bit soon, isn't it?"

Adrian exclaimed vehemently: "This is the most horrible business I've ever come across! I'm not such a fool that I can't see that everything points to a murderer in this house—and that's a complete possibility. I know we're all under suspicion and yet not one of us could be a murderer."

"You're convinced of that?"

"Absolutely and utterly."

"Then what alternative have you?"

"Some outsider got in—that man who came to see my uncle——"

"You can put him out of your mind. He was, as I thought from the beginning, a red herring. I saw him, myself, a few hours ago. He has a complete alibi for Friday night. He left this house in a hurry to catch a bus. He caught it. He went to a pub and stayed there until closing time. He went to his lodgings and a neighbour saw him go in. His landlady called him early and found him asleep in bed. I have completely dismissed him from consideration."

Adrian sighed, heavily. "So that's that. As a point of interest, Mr. Austen, did you find out what he came here for?"

Austen grinned. "He didn't tell me and it's not likely that he would, but I've a very fair idea. He was trying to blackmail your uncle—without success."

"Good Lord! What about?"

"He didn't confide in me. He didn't even admit that it was so—somewhat naturally. The important thing is that he's of no further consideration. The subject is, so to speak, closed."

"Now to revert to your uncle's will—and a personal question, Yalding. I saw your expression when you heard of his legacy to you. You looked surprised. Were you?"

"I was, indeed."

"Didn't you expect anything?"

"Yes, but nothing like that. A few hundred, perhaps at the most. Uncle Walter had already done so much for me, and you see—he paid for the whole of my education, made me an allowance at Cambridge and continued it until I was earning enough to keep myself. Since then he's given me substantial presents from time to time. I saw no reason why he should leave me much."

Austen got up. "We'll, that's all for tonight," he said. "I'd advise you to go to bed and get what rest you can. Tomorrow looks like being a very busy day for all of us."

As Adrian closed the door behind him, Curtis put down his notebook.

"I believe you've made up your mind, Austen," he said, smiling.

Austen laughed, softly. "Practically."

"Are you telling me?"

"No. Of course not. I can't prove it—yet. I can't prove a thing."

"But you think you know."

"Oh yes! I *think* so. Psychologically there are only two people who could be guilty, so presumably one of them is."

"Same person both jobs?"

"It looks like that to me, but I'll admit it's all theory, so far. Not a scrap of proof."

"You'll get it," said Curtis with a chuckle. "You'll get it. You always do."

I 2

CAROL was sitting in the middle of a sofa drawn close up to the fire, with Miles and Adrian on either side of her.

Austen thought how lovely she looked. She had evidently been crying, as much from shock, probably, as from grief, but she was one of those lucky people whom tears do not mar. With her small, tear-stained face without make-up, and her gold hair falling softly round it, she looked innocent and young, and very very tired.

"You all ought to be in bed," Austen told them, surveying the scene, and feeling very adult in contrast to their youth. "Mrs. Benson, I shan't keep you long. I just want to task you one or two questions. Alone, please."

She lifted her head to look at him

"You're not my idea of a detective at all," she said, with an effort at lightness. "You're kind and considerate, and in the books they yell at you and grill you all night."

"Well, I don't. Anyway, that's America, isn't it?"

"I expect it is. Run along, boys, and Mr. Austen can get down to his third degree."

Miles and Adrian took themselves off and Austen sat down near Carol.

He said: "This won't take long. First of all, what wakened you tonight? The sound of the shot?"

She hesitated. "I don't think so. I mean, I didn't know it was a shot. I just woke suddenly and then heard voices outside my room and they sounded excited. So I went out to see what was happening."

" Next, did your husband own a gun? "

" Not that I know of."

" Did your father? "

" Oh yes! "

" Where did he keep it? "

" I'm not sure. In his study, I think."

" Do you know how to use it? "

She laughed. " Not very well, I'm afraid. He tried to teach me, but I didn't get on very well. He tried to teach Mummy too, and she was even more of a failure than I was."

" What about Mrs. Lestrangle? "

" I've heard that she's a marvellous shot," Carol told him, smiling. " Everything she does, she does well, you know. She did all sorts of mysterious things in the war, anyway."

Austen chuckled. " That may not necessarily have involved shooting. However, let's get on. Tell me, do you know of anyone who disliked your husband enough to want to kill him? "

That made her very serious.

" Lots of people out in Persia didn't like him—but, that was all. No one *hated* him, I mean. He used to annoy people there, rather. He got quarrelling and threw his weight about and put peoples' backs up. I don't know why—he could be so nice when he tried."

" How did he get on with people here, in England, in this house? "

" Oh! all right—except with my father."

" But you don't know of any quarrels he had with anyone else? "

She shook her head. " No, I don't."

Then she turned to him and said in a confidential voice. " Mr. Austen, it is absolutely certain that Guy didn't—shoot himself, isn't it? "

"It is. Why?"

"I'm so thankful, you know. They told me, to begin with, that he'd done it himself and then, you see, I felt it was my fault."

"What made you feel that?"

"Well, we'd had a real bust up this afternoon. It was pretty beastly, but I simply couldn't help it. I'd found out absolutely for certain that he only cared about my money, so I told him that nothing would stop my getting a divorce. It was pretty horrible—having to do it, I mean—because Mummy and Grand'mère set to work on me and tried to persuade me not to. I knew they would, of course. Before, when father told me it was the best thing to do, they were always telling him that it was wrong and he'd no business to influence me. Now, of course, I wish I hadn't said anything."

Her eyes filled with tears and he patted her gently on the shoulder.

"My dear child," he said, in what he meant to be a soothing, avuncular voice. "That milk is spilt. You did what you thought was right and what happened afterwards isn't your fault."

And God forgive me for that lie, he thought.

"You are kind!" she cried. "Oh! Mr. Austen, when is all this awful business going to be over? First father, then Guy—all the world seems upside down and everything seems so—so *unsafe*! I can't believe these things are happening to us——"

He got up from his chair and stood looking down at her.

"Look," he said, gently. "I'm going to read you a lecture. Your father and your husband are dead and that part of your life which was bound up with them is finished. You are only concerned with the future, now. Whatever happens, whatever *may* happen, you have a great responsibility—your child. You will have to bring

him up. You will be, partly at any rate, responsible for what he becomes. You want him to be strong and self-reliant and—and good. That's your task for the future. That's what you've got to think about and devote yourself to. You mustn't let the private sorrows which will come to you—no one escapes them, my child—come between you and that job of yours. When you're unhappy, comfort yourself with the thought that you have this responsibility to your son and let that come before everything.

"Now, good-night. Go to bed and sleep as well as you can and be ready to meet whatever comes with courage."

He went slowly upstairs to Guy Benson's room, where Curtis and Flyte were waiting for him. "

He sighed, heavily, before he asked, "Got what I wanted?"

"Yes," Curtis said. "Here you are. There's a mass of prints on that door leading to the landing—anyone's, everyone's—it had been well messed up, naturally, before we got here.

"The verandah door has been handled with gloves and so has the gun, except where Benson's fingers touched it. That's that.

"Now, as I see it, practically anyone in this house could have got into this room by the balcony. It was locked, all right, but several easily available keys fit it. Moreover, the balcony goes right along this side of the house and all these bedroom windows open on to it, including, as you know, that of Yalding's room. That is empty and unlocked and anyone, absolutely anyone who wanted to, could have gone into it, opened his window, taken the key—which of course, as you'd expect, doesn't hold prints—opened this window, shot Benson and gone back the way they came, locking the window behind

them, taking the key and replacing it where it came from.

Austen said: "Thanks, Curtis. Well, that'll be all for tonight. We're going to bed and getting some sleep."

"No more interviews?" Flyte asked.

"Not to-night. We'll let these poor devils here sleep while they can. The morning's almost here and it's going to be a bit of a strain for all of us."

The morning dawned bright and clear and frosty on the kind of day in which Austen would normally have rejoiced.

As it was, with the prospect of an ordeal which he deeply disliked ahead of him, he felt depressed and dispirited in spite of the sunshine dancing on the snow.

He didn't talk at breakfast—not that he was usually one of those chatty breakfasters who frequently make other quieter peoples' lives so gloomy in the mornings—but ate very little and that in silence.

Curtis, out of a long experience of the Superintendent's ways, was full of sympathy for him. As he very well knew, an arrest was imminent though he, personally, wasn't sure who was going to be arrested. He knew, too, that when a case arrived at this stage, Austen was almost always on edge, even although he were in no doubt of his own judgment. It was for William Austen an almost inevitable reaction; a result of his deep humanity and his understanding of the curious workings of the mind of man.

So Curtis quickly fell in with his chief's mood and didn't attempt to intrude on his withdrawnness.

After breakfast Austen called on Dr. Grange and spent ten minutes or so talking to him. After that they all went on to Lawn Lodge, arriving, by design, just after Guy

Benson's body had been removed in an ambulance to the mortuary. The local experts, photographers and so on, had already been and gone.

Austen went straight upstairs to Walter Yalding's bedroom and busied himself there for a time. When he had finished, he spoke to Curtis and Flyte about his findings. "I don't think there's any doubt that Yalding kept the gun in there," he said, pointing to a drawer he had pulled open. "Look for yourselves. You can see its impression on those scarves and things. It had probably lain there, untouched, for quite a time, covered up by those silk handkerchiefs I've moved. Try for fingerprints, Curtis, but I don't expect you'll find any of value. I should expect the housemaid's and Yalding's own, with gloves superimposed round the handle."

He proved right in his surmises and prepared to move on.

"What next?" Curtis asked.

"I want to talk to people. Flyte, will you go and find out where everyone is? Don't disturb them; just get the information and bring it to me. I shall wait in Benson's room."

Flyte was soon back with his report.

"Adrian Yalding is in his uncle's study. Mrs. Benson and Woodcote are in the nursery playing with the baby. I'm told that Mrs. Yalding is still in bed and Mrs. Lestrangle is writing letters in her daughter's sitting-room."

"Good," Austen said. "Let's hope they all stay where they are for a bit."

He took a deep breath and turned to Curtis.

"I'm going to try a tricky bit of finesse, old man. If you think I'm going wrong with it, let me know, will you?—just a quiet sign that you don't agree."

"What's the general idea?" Curtis wanted to know.

"To get my ideas corroborated. I'm certain now, that

I know who did both murders, but, as I told you last night, there isn't a shadow of proof and, frankly, I don't see how I'm going to get any. This is one of those tricky jobs where there's nothing we can take hold of. Unpremeditated murders done by an amateur who doesn't want to be caught but isn't scared of it—that type is always the most difficult.”

“So what?”

“So someone has to be startled into an admission or something of that kind. Damn it, what else is there left?”

Curtis nodded gravely. “As you say and never an easy job to bring off. Still, you've done it a good many times before.”

“Yes, but I don't like doing it. Curtis, however, needs must. Let's get to it.”

As they walked along the corridor he whispered an instruction to Flyte who nodded.

They found Mrs. Lestrangle regal still in black and pearls in the small sitting room which opened out of Annette's bedroom.

She looked round from her seat at a writing table with an expression of surprise and some annoyance as the three detectives walked into the room.

She got up and faced them.

I am very busy,” she said coldly. “I was anxious not to be disturbed.”

Austen apologised. “I'm extremely sorry but I'm afraid it's unavoidable. As you yourself remarked the other day when it's a case of murder the ordinary rules don't apply.”

She acknowledged that by a gracious and graceful bow.

“That is of course true. I must submit then. About what did you wish to see me?”

“About the murder of Guy Benson.”

Her elegant, arched eyebrows lifted. "It is murder, then?"

"It is."

"You have decided? Last night I was informed that he had committed suicide."

"Which would have been so much more satisfactory," he put in.

She permitted herself the ghost of a smile. "One admits it, Mr. Austen. Suicide would have been exceedingly unpleasant and regrettable—but murder! Alas! One has then to try to discover the murderer."

"That is very true."

She turned the full battery of her charm—which was considerable—on him and in a voice of sweet persuasion enquired:

"That will be very difficult, will it not, Mr. Austen? Might it not be better to let the first verdict remain uncontradicted?"

He laughed, outright. "Leave it at suicide, you mean? From your point of view, undoubtedly. From mine—you know my answer, Mrs. Lestrangle. I am a policeman."

"A pity, I feel. So—why have you come to me?"

Again he laughed. "Do you know, I begin to wonder, myself. To warn you, perhaps. I shall get no help from you."

She was all sweet reasonableness. "Alas! That is so true. If I could help you I should be delighted to do so, but it is not in my power. To warn me, you say? Pray, of what?"

"Mrs. Lestrangle, I know who did these two murders. They were done by the same person for the same reason, and you know that as well as I do."

She appeared astonished. "I?" Indeed, you overestimate my powers of discernment."

"No," he said, decisively. "You know and I know."

My powers of what you call discernment are equal to yours."

Quick as a flash she reposted. "But you have no proof."

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

For the first time she hesitated, then, slowly, she said: "You *can* have no proof. There *is* none."

"Again, how do you know that if you are as"—he paused to choose his exact word—"as innocent of knowledge as you profess?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Instinct, perhaps."

He moved a little so that he could look even more directly at her.

"Mrs. Lestrangle, don't let's waste any more time in fencing. I repeat, I know who the murderer is and I shall prove it. I shall make an arrest today."

She went white then under her exquisite make-up and, for a second, held her lower lip between her small teeth. Then she released it and looked straight at him.

"In that case," she announced in a firm voice, "I must accept what you say and act accordingly. If you have proof you may arrest me for the murders of Walter Yalding and Guy Benson."

Austen said: "Do you wish to make a statement? I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used as evidence—"

"She said: "Take down what you like. I have said all I wish to."

"You confess to these murders?"

She bowed her head

"Mrs. Lestrangle," Austen said. "Will you state, categorically, that you committed these murders?"

"I have told you that I did."

"Forgive me, you have *not*. You said that I might arrest you for them."

Her handsome face betrayed nothing. She stood erect

and held herself with extreme dignity and poise even in this extremity, but Austen was certain that she was filled with indecision. She was hesitant to commit herself completely. Her mind was questing for a loophole.

He wasn't sorry about this. According to his calculations the moment had not yet arrived when he was ready for her to make the ultimate statement.

He played for time. "Will you tell me how you did those murders?" he asked.

He could see that she was relieved.

"That is simple," she told him. "I put a pillow over Walter's face and held it there until he was dead. I took Walter's gun and shot Guy as he slept."

"Where did you find the gun?"

"In the desk in Walter's study."

"Indeed? How did you get into Benson's room—which was locked and had no key?"

For a second she hesitated. "Oh! my own key fitted."
"I see."

He suppressed a sigh of sheer relief. The moment had come. He raised his voice a little. "Mrs. Lestrangle, will you repeat after me: 'I confess to the murders of Walter Yalding and Guy Benson'."

She hesitated only for a second.

"Very well," she answered, quietly. "I confess to——"

Annette Yalding walked slowly through the door from her bedroom which had been opened by Flyte, according to instructions, at the beginning of the interview.

In a very low but peremptory voice, she spoke.

"No, Mama," she said. "You must not say that."

Mrs. Lestrangle wheeled round, everything forgotten but her daughter.

Annette had evidently only recently got out of bed. She was wrapped in a dressing-gown, her long dark hair

tied back with a ribbon. Her face was white and drawn and without make-up, even her lips were colourless. She looked very ill and swayed a little.

Mrs. Lestrangle ran to her. "My darling! What are you doing here? Go back to bed at once. Come! I will take you there."

"No," Annette said, quietly. "I shall not go back to bed, Mama, until I hear you deny that you killed Walter and Guy."

"She can't do that, Mrs. Yalding," Austen told her. "She has already admitted it."

He moved forward and very gently led Annette to the chaise-longue and settled her on it.

She sighed with thankfulness as she lay down and then looked up at Austen.

"My mother didn't kill anyone," she said, firmly. "She is trying to shield someone. She is trying to shield——"

Mrs. Lestrangle cut her short. "Be silent, Annette! You do not know what you are saying. You are ill. Your mind is not clear."

Her face had a desperate, agonised look as she turned to Austen.

"Take no notice of her," she begged. "She is delirious. You must not believe anything that she says. I, only I, am responsible for these things. I will say what you wish me to: I confess——"

Annette struggled feebly to get up. "No, Mama. No!" she cried. "That is a lie. Mr. Austen, I killed my husband and son-in-law. I had to. There was no other way."

Mrs. Lestrangle tried in vain to prevent Annette from speaking, but she would not be stilled.

"It is a relief," she said, "to tell the truth. I shall die more happily for my confession. Write down what I say, please, so that no one can ever be blamed for what I did."

"Are you sure that you have the strength to speak now?" Austen asked. "I can wait, you know."

She shook her head. "I would rather get it over. I want to explain everything."

"I had to kill Walter. He was ruining Carol's life and character by his possessiveness. He was going to make her fall into mortal sin by divorcing Guy. He bribed Guy to commit adultery."

"He came and told me so last Friday night. He had offered money for it and Guy had accepted it. I pleaded with him—with Walter—but it was no use. He wouldn't listen to me. So I knew that the time had come. Only I could save Carol."

"Walter asked for sleeping tablets and I told him to take four. He slept heavily and I laid my pillow over his face while he slept."

"I was almost happy when I had done it. I had saved Carol, and though I had committed mortal sin, it was I who would suffer, not Carol. Besides, I had sacrificed something I cared for. Walter was very dear to me, in his way."

"I thought that no one would ever be blamed for it and I could spend the rest of my life in expiation. I didn't want to be found out. I wanted to stay with Carol as long as I could."

"Then, last night, I realised that it had all been in vain, that Carol was going to divorce Guy after all and marry Miles. I had to prevent that, of course."

"I knew that Guy was drunk, but he might have wakened, so I took Walter's gun and shot him."

She lay back, exhausted. Mrs. Lestrangle ran into the bedroom and brought her brandy.

Annette drank it, thankfully, and a little colour came to her lips.

Austen said: "Are you well enough to answer a question, Mrs. Yalding?"

She half smiled. "Oh yes! Nothing will hurt me, now." Mrs. Lestrangle tried to interfere, but Annette brushed her aside.

"I shall be happier when it's all clear," she said. "What do you want to know, Mr. Austen?"

"Your husband's gun, Mrs. Yalding: Where did you get it from?"

"It was in a drawer in his bedroom. I took it out after he died and hid it in my own room. I don't know why. I just felt that I wanted to have it; that I might need it."

"And last night," Austen went on, "You used it to shoot Benson. I will tell you what you did and you shall confirm it. That will save your strength."

"You went from your own room along the balcony to Benson's room and you unlocked his french window with the key from yours. You shot him and put his hand round the gun. You wore gloves all the time."

"Then you went out, locking the door behind you, by the balcony to your own room, and when the alarm was given you came out into the corridor as though you'd just got up from bed."

She nodded. "Yes, it happened just like that"

"All that has been written down by Inspector Curtis," he told her. "I shall ask you to read it and if it is correct to sign it."

She said "Yes——" and Mrs. Lestrangle broke in with an impassioned plea that Annette should refuse to sign, should deny everything she had confessed.

Annette said, very quietly and gravely: "Mama, darling, what does it matter? You mustn't be afraid for me. I have sinned, but I shall not even be punished—on earth I am dying, you know—my heart. I have known for some time that I couldn't live long and I have got much worse lately. I've seen a specialist and I made Dr Grange tell me the truth. It will be soon now and then all these

earnly troubles will be over. You must look after Carol for me——”

Her voice had been growing fainter and weaker, and then, very quietly, she fainted

Late that evening the three Scotland Yard men travelled back to London by train through the snowy countryside

“I’m glad she won’t have to be hanged,” Curtis said quietly,

“She won’t even live to be tried” Austen told him “Grange told me this morning that she might easily have died last night Any moment now may bring the end A brave woman Curtis Misguided her mind bewi’dered and misled, but with great courage

“You were right as usual, sir,” Flyte put in, “when you said at the beginning that when you knew about Walter Yalding’s character you’d be on the way to knowing who murdered him”

“Yes I was wasn’t I’” Austen grinned “So you see psychology does count even in detection Look, young Flyte you can follow this thing through logically, from the very beginning and it all starts with Walter Yalding’s temperament or nature or character or whatever you like to call it It’s the House that Jack Built You start with Yalding He was determined to dominate his daughter He babied her as the Americans say, until he managed to keep her a child One day she made a tentative effort to get out of leading strings and ran away to marry Benson Then she comes home again found the leading strings still waiting for her and quietly stepped into them again Yalding had her where he wanted her and started arranging her life again That involved divorce, which Mrs Yalding thinks is Sin—therefore first Yalding and then Benson must be wiped out

The person I’m sorry for in all this, is Mrs Yalding

She is probably a little unbalanced and she felt it her duty to do murder to save her daughter from hell. In doing that, she has, she believes, condemned herself to hell—a willing sacrifice. Her future is a matter of opinion, but, believe me, she has suffered her hell already, here below, when she decided that she must kill her husband."